Monster Girl Saga Vol5

Monster Girl Saga - V

Anonemoose

Chapter 66

A soft drizzle of rain drums against the linen umbrella, and a dozen tiny waterfalls cascade to the ground. There small rivers trickle, gather and flow, gently roiling down the grooves of a stonework masonry. It is a calm composition; a melody that suits the remote getaway seated on the edge of a lonely and rocky hill. A monastery supported by a small quaint village surrounded by nothing but nature. No other trace of civilization exists for leagues around.

Tiny waterfalls cascade between the ramparts down a hundred meters of sheer cliff and into the valley below. The late afternoon sun is blocked by dense grey clouds, and only sparse breaks allow a few rays of brilliant sunshine to illuminate the dulled landscape below. Far below the monastery and its village are swampy wetlands where the rainwater had begun to pool into an impenetrable mess of muck and fog. There the oasis sits alone, high above the mire and isolated from the rest of the world.

Leaning off the side of the mountain, in the monastery's terrace garden, are four people. They gather around a circular table where a gentle breeze caresses them. The pure and fresh air, which had made the location a famous sanatorium, invigorates their souls instead of chilling them to the bone. Two sit at the table while two others attend behind them. Steam rises from a piping hot kettle and whisks into the breeze.

Basking in the grey sunlight sits a plump older woman with her bluish-grey hair cut short. Youth had long left her, but the lack of wrinkles on her face showed that it had not yet forgotten her. She was short, round and squashed, but she has the airs of a regal and dignified mother. A pair of sharp and sparkling baby-blue eyes peek out from behind her squinting gaze. Her eyelids have become so heavy with the passage of time that she no longer has the energy to keep them fully aloft and gives a perpetually laid-back appearance. Hanging from her shoulders were rolls of tapestry adorned with the runes of an old language no longer spoken. Yet it exhibits the entirety of her favorite passages from the Chronicles of The Almighty, her eternal master.

The robes she clothes herself in displays her status, even a peasant busy ploughing his field would recognize it in an instant. Rich red dye and real gold embroidery make a masterpiece out of a simple brown priest's garment. With dignified poise, she holds up a tiny white saucer in her left, a tea cup in her right. As she sips the hot brew, the man sitting across from her fidgets. She is one of the nine. The Seventh Grand Cardinal: one of the most influential and powerful women in the world.

Sitting opposite of her was another elderly man with long and straight whiskers jutting out from the sides of his head. The sun at his back almost gave him a halo, but his worried face and restless fingers dispelled any illusion of divinity. Age had not been as kind, and his face was being pulled down by gravity without an ounce of youth in his bones to resist it. His robes are dyed the same brilliant red, but they lack the amount of gold and other articles of office. He is a bishop, which would be an impressive station on its own, but even he had to bow his head to the woman who sits in front of him. The teacup and saucer sit motionless on the table in front of him.

Standing behind the man was a page; a young teenage boy acting as the servant for the two holy dignitaries. His features are forgettable as is his plain chestnut colored hair and mud colored robe, but his discipline while remaining perfectly still, attentive and not distracted is admirable. Behind the Grand Cardinal was a man of much higher stature. A tall man encased in a suit of gleaming silver armor. Plates trimmed with gold and polished to a mirror shine with a richly dyed tabard of a bronze star. Under his left arm he cradled a winged helmet while the fingers on his right drummed against his armor, just next to the hilt of his sword. Long platinum blond hair catches in the wind while a pair of sharp blue eyes watch carefully above his aquiline nose and handsome cheekbones.

Breaking the long silence at last, the old bishop speaks, “My lady, it is almost twilight of the third day. I can arrange a bath be drawn before you slumber and your belongings gathered for your journey back to Perrsolis in the morning.”

The old man's voice is shaky which was strange given the nature of his company. One eye of the Grand Cardinal opens, and it beams straight on the man. She calmly puts the saucer and cup back on the table as she takes a deep resigned breath.

“And I shall wait until the sun has vanished on this third day.” Her toadish voice softly speaks, rasping as though her lungs had been shriveled by decades of smoking. “I am quite certain my invitation reached him, and if I return to the capital now... I most likely will not have this chance again.”

A clatter of armor interjects as the knight behind her shifts on his feet to salute, “If I may speak honestly, your holiness...”

The Grand Cardinal does not respond; she instead lifts her tea cup again, and the man takes that as a yes.

“I have stationed my men far and wide in a secure perimeter around Kneljewl. With thirty minute intervals between reports I have yet to receive any word of inbound travelers. It is already quite late on this third day; I highly doubt he has chosen to accept your invitation.”

“Even you now, Sir Abdren? I expected more patience from

a Paladin Captain."

The man saluting with a clenched fist across his chest sighs in his own resignation in deference to her.

"Your holiness, I merely wish to put the least distance between us and the capital before the spring melt finishes and summer is upon us. The Demon Realms between Kneljewl and Perrsolis will be restless during the heat and their radius more expansive and unpredictable after the winter chill."

Unperturbed, the Grand Cardinal finishes the last of her cup and sets it back on the table. The servant springs into action to refill it; meanwhile, she calmly responds to the paladin's concerns.

"The journey back concerns me less than ignorance. I also relish the chance to make an exchange."

With a scrape of wood against stone, the bishop seated across from her leans forward in his chair which sends it backward. His fidgety and nervous eyes are immediately replaced with passion as the words from the Grand Cardinal's lips set a fire beneath him.

"I must risk rudeness and insult in order to protest, my lady! We of his Holy Church should not stoop so low to make deals with lowlifes, no matter the circumstance."

"I too must agree, your holiness," the paladin agrees. "I shall follow your any order, but it is also my duty to advise. If you would leave the matter to me and my men-"

"Just as I have for the last two years with no results to show for it?" The Grand Cardinal interrupts while she lifts a fresh cup of tea to her lips.

The Paladin and bishop stop in their tracks and grit their teeth. The old man slumps back in his chair while the paladin's shoulders slump in defeat with a sigh. Neither had a response, and she takes one long savoring sip before placating their concerns.

"If half the rumors I have heard are true, then he will be more than helpful."

"How can you be so sure?" the bishop asks. "I have heard many rumors; a simple woodcutter who is abducted one day by a giant. A woman standing twice as tall as any man and six times stronger. Later, he claims he is Baron of Relly Crossing, demands tolls and takes what he wants from town while riding upon her shoulder like a child."

His tone is rude, but he is fired up with genuine passion and concern that he could not be faulted for. If she took offense it did not show.

"I did not come here because of trivial local matters, Bishop. That is your responsibility to solve." She says sternly.

The Bishop is shocked, but he flusters and continues talking

regardless, “T-then the minstrel of Gallover? Playing his tune in a grove three counties over. Attracts the attention of a wretched little imp. Only a few years later and the place is littered with them, corrupting the children!”

The Grand Cardinal's posture changes immediately upon the Bishop mentioning children. Her lip twists upward in disgust, her brows furrow and she nearly cracks her tea cup as she brings it down on the table. The Bishop cowers and slinks back in his seat when her fierce eyes burn into him.

“Be careful with your words. Brother Octavus. I know not what deal you struck with the Fourth of the Nine... But I do have an idea what unsavory activities led to your transfer from that Orphanage you used to headmaster-”

The Bishop's face begins to go pale.

“-I have put up with your hospitality for two full days now. But do not presume 'that' and some choice tea leaves will bolster my patience with you forever. I may forget having you flogged or worse in my presence is not worth the trouble. You being able to sit right now at all is only because I have more important things to do than quarrel with Grand Cardinal Yelkovich.”

His face has gone pure white, and he now throws his chair back in order to prostrate himself on the ground beside the Grand Cardinal. His forehead grinds into floor as the rest of his body hugs the soaked stone.

“P-please! I mean no disrespect! Forgive me! I have already paid for my sins. Please!”

The moaning of the old man does not please the woman at all, nor the paladin standing behind her. Her tea begins to taste like ash, causing her to purse her lips for a moment, while he wails and begs for forgiveness in such an unpleasant and undignified manner. But she bares with it until the moment passes, and she takes a fresh swig from her dainty cup.

Sir Abdren whispers into the Grand Cardinal's ear on the Bishop's behalf and for their collective curiosity, “Those two cases are but some of many for this area, but you claim that is no longer our business?”

“A cover story, Sir Abdren.” She speaks plainly, not whispering back. “Your ignorance is for your own protection. No. Who we are meeting may be an Incubus Lord.”

The Bishop's wailing stops, even the paladin is taken aback while the old man plastered to the floor looks up with shock and awe on his face.

“Your holiness!” The paladin shouts, concern dripping from his voice.

“I said, 'may be',” The Grand Cardinal says, her own voice brimming with a chastising tone. “I have my suspicions this may be a special case. If it is true, then he may be of use to me... And I may have what he wants.”

“I would have prepared differently for your safety if I had known this, your holiness!” The paladin pleads.

“Feigned weakness, Sir Abdren. Bait for the trap. I do not believe he means any harm, so long as we display no threat.”

Sir Abdren once more relents in deference to the Grand Cardinal, but his mind races as it tries to reorganize all his plans and preparations. An Incubus Lord is perhaps one of the most dangerous beings to walk the world. Not because of any imminent threat of aggression, but because of the potential power they can wield when not otherwise preoccupied. Many monsters roam and may prey on many men, but even they will settle down eventually. Out of ten men tempted and their souls stolen by monsters, nine are locked in an unbreakable mating pair. One out of the ten, however, are something else.

Neither Abdren nor the Grand Cardinal know the reason why, but some men are subjugated to more than just a pairing. A single monster, a single tribal unit, is dangerous on its own, but many monsters gathered together with one collective purpose is on another unimaginable level of danger. It was an army of monsters acting together a thousand years ago that brought humanity to the brink of extinction. Monsters had always been a constant threat, but they were never unified in purpose and would just as readily fight amongst themselves rather than prey upon humanity. Some men gather monsters much like a flower may attract not only the bees but butterflies and birds. The power he can wield through them, if he is ambitious, is a danger to humanity.

The Grand Cardinal was about to speak again, but she just as suddenly purses her lips and silences her tongue. The Grand Cardinal's attention looks over the bishop and off into the distance. Her silence worries the two men, but they dare not say a thing and instead wait for her to continue.

“Have either of you ever traveled further north than here?” She asks at last.

“N-no, my lady.” The Bishop says as he slowly and cautiously stands on his two feet again. “My title resides here, but I have never had the need to travel to more northern and pagan lands.” He says, spitting at the mention of those living in the north.

“I squired for Commander Fleiterhorn at the Darrick Archipelago a decade ago, but this is as far north as I have ever been, your holiness.” The paladin responds with a touch of pride in the

beginning.

"I see." She says calmly.

Her attention turns to the quiet servant standing by. The boy almost leaps out of his skin when her old blue eyes turn on him.

"We have finished with our tea. Please take it away and return only when we send for you." She commands him with a smile.

The page almost panics at the way she politely addresses him with a smile, but never before has anyone gathered delicate china faster than him. With a veritable circus act, he waddles away from the table as he balances more finery than he is worth in his arms. He skillfully navigates through the garden and disappears back into the monastery. The bishop and paladin look at one another, pressing the other for answers with their eyes, but neither has anything to offer the other. The Grand Cardinal merely closes her eyes and starts breathing deeply as if to calm and center herself.

In the distance, a bestial shriek is carried by the wind. It is faint, but all three persons at the table hear it together. The sound of it sends shivers down their spines. Even the Grand Cardinal shudders a little as she twitches in discomfort for a moment. Abdren reaches for his sword and pulls it half way out of his scabbard on instinct while the bishop spins around to look out into the distance. There, on the horizon, they spot a large green shape descending from the grey clouds.

Another shrieking roar is carried in on the wind, and the table itself shudders ever so slightly. With alarming speed, the green mass descends upon the monastery, and it glides right by. Two massive leathery and scaled wings and a long muscular tail steer and steady the monster as it strafes the garden terrace only fifty meters above. It is difficult for the three in the garden to make out, but it is without a doubt a wyvern. The paladin looks on with his mouth agape as he witnesses something out of his childhood stories, and the bishop breaks out in a cold sweat and is on the brink of panicking yet again. The Grand Cardinal is breathing deeply, but she remains calm.

Something smaller and brown is holding tightly at the base of its neck, which becomes visible as the wyvern banks right and circles back around. Someone was riding upon its back. There was also a white ribbon tied around the beast's neck which the man seemed to be holding onto like reigns. With powerful flaps from its wings it slows down, circles, steers and descends upon the monastery. The linen umbrella is blown away as a buffet of wind kicks up wind, water and dust into the air. The mighty green wyvern with razor sharp teeth the size of arms, great and mighty horns protruding from its dinosaur like head and massive muscles in its colossal wings, legs and tail grab hold of the rampart. The weight of the beast hitting the balcony causes her teacup to leap from its saucer and roll off the table to smash on the

floor.

The cardinal and paladin were drenched in a spray of rainwater; the old man retreats behind the paladin while the Grand Cardinal does her best to remain seated at the table, unperturbed. Her eyes are wide open now though. She had once seen a wyvern in her youth, but the size of this one now only twenty meters away astounds even her. It stands twice as tall as any horse, about thirty hands from talons to the top of its head. Even then, it is hunching, not even standing upright on its hind legs with its back rigidly straight.

A wyvern that is about one and a half times larger than an average wyvern. It is a relic of a bygone age. A time more than a hundred years ago when the monsters of the world took on completely different forms. It was a giant and fierce flying dragon. Its golden reptilian eyes watch the three of them carefully; a heat mirage shimmers through the rain droplets and puffs of steam rise from its head as the rain evaporated on contact. Its talons dig into the stone rampart that crack under its strength, each talon is like its own curved sword. Those fierce eyes turn on the paladin with his hand still on his sword, and it narrows its eyes at him. It was a disturbing sign of intelligence from the creature; he let go of his hilt and allows his sword to slide back into the scabbard.

The wyvern bows its head and reveals the cloaked man hidden by its massive frame. He dismounts carefully and sets foot at last on the solid stone. With a clank, leather and steel boots clink like spurs. His tattered and ragged brown cloak is soaked and sticks to him. The three at the table notice the brilliant blue from his pants, a rare dye to the likes of them. A shaggy head of brown hair whips in the wind, and a layer of stubble covers his face. His face is grimy; many days and many miles of dirt has stuck to his face and clothes, but even then, the glint of his blue eyes shine through.

Behind him a brilliant flash of light consumes the massive frame of the mighty wyvern. With a shimmer and ringing like a struck tuning fork, the form changes, shrinks and twists. Human features, a woman's silhouette, forms complete with massive bust and fit feminine curves, yet the wings, talons and horns remain. The woman, now standing where the wyvern had just been seconds ago, leaps off the rampart next to the man, and they walk forward side by side. A long white scarf with two long tassels flutters in the wind as it wraps around the bottom half of her face and neck.

The closer they approach, the more the size and scale of them hits home for those gathered at the table. The man stands just over half a head taller than even Sir Abdren, and the wyvern beside him stands a full head taller than him. The scraping and thudding sound of her talons on the masonry unnerves them while the constant clank of

the man matches its tempo.

They both stop at the other edge of the table, and the man speaks, “This is the right address, right? Because we've seen those faces like that earlier and it turned out to be the wrong address.”

An awkward silence hangs over the balcony. The rain continues to drizzle unabated as it soaks all five of them. A chill from the cold reception and failure to break the ice was so bad, if the puddles were to freeze over, the wyvern's heavy footsteps might very well fail to even crack them. The Grand Cardinal swallows heavily while the paladin's hand inches closer and closer to the hilt of his sword, and the Bishop cowers in fear behind them all. An arm slips out from underneath the man's tattered brown cloak, and a steel gauntlet grabs the back of the Bishop's old chair. He pulls it away from the table, the wooden legs shuddering and groaning against the wet stone. It's the only sound other than the rain as he seats himself and just as slowly pulls himself under the table. All the while his furrowed expression doesn't let up. Now sitting at the table, his pent steel fingers rest on the stone table, and he looks dead-on into the Grand Cardinal's old grandmotherly eyes.

“Mr. Laven... I presume?” The Grand Cardinal speaks at last.

“That would be me.” He replies.

She takes another long breath and exhales even longer.

“I am Grand Cardinal Ulmpher, the Seven of Nine of our Lord's, the Almighty's, Holy Church.”

“I heard... From the notes you left. I thought it was safe to assume considering how much you stand out.”

The Grand Cardinal restrains herself at how casual and disrespectful the man was being, but it is Abdren whose job it is to be outraged for her.

“Watch your tongue, peasant. Show due respect or I'll-”

The paladin stops in his track when the wyvern's gold eyes lock onto him and start burning holes through him. He withers for a second, but bred and trained hatred bolsters his courage in no time.

“And who is this supposed to be?” He says, looking up at the wyvern across the table, puffing his chest out to try pretending he is bigger than he really is. “What's with the mask?”

“It doesn't matter who I am; what matters is what he wants... You shouldn't care who I am because no one cared who I was until I put on the mask” The wyvern says, muffled by the scarf.

Abdren's fingers itch and twitch on his waist next to his swords hilt as he tries to stare down the monstrous woman. He wrestles and tries to regain some control of the situation as he continues to bluster with his pride and bravado.

“If you won't remove it, then maybe I should?... Would it kill you?”

“It would be extremely painful-”

He flashes a wry grin, “You're a big girl-”

“-For you.” She says with a threatening rumble in her voice.

A presence radiates off the wyvern as her eyes glare at the man in the shining suit of armor, and a blood-lust in the air weighs down on the haughty paladin. A deadly cocktail mixes in the wyvern's lungs as she takes a deep breath, and a catalyst in her saliva pools.

“Abdren! Enough!” The old woman croaks.

The paladin—who looked like a small rodent in the presence of a snake ready to strike—shudders and bows his head to the Grand Cardinal.

“And you, Laven. Control that... beast of yours.”

Laven's hands clench on the table top, and his brows furrow even further while the corner of his mouth curls anger.

“I don't tell her what to do,” He hisses. “And if I hear you call her that again, I'll encourage her instead.”

Another awkward silence descends with nothing but the rain to try washing it away. Abdren stirs restlessly behind the Grand Cardinal, but he is frozen in a standoff. His eyes dart off to the side every so often. He wants to look back at the monastery, back where his reinforcements are. His confidence in the blessed longsword at his waist goes only so far since he would have to deliver a fatal strike immediately. If it was anything less than a mortal blow with all his strength that hit squarely, even his divine weapon would only injure the wyvern. He'd provoke a counterattack he could not weather alone without his shield. There was a clear and present danger, but he knew there were marksmen watching the garden from the monastery as well.

When he looks back at the wyvern, her eyes are no longer locked on him but far beyond and above him. His heart jumps for a moment; it is an opportunity, but he had been ordered to stand down so he takes in a long breath to calm himself instead.

“Three men in the bell tower. Crossbows.” The wyvern says.

The paladin's heart sinks. Laven looks back and up at her, and the Grand Cardinal's hands cling tightly to her robe while her face remains frozen in place and refuses to budge and reveal even a trace of worry.

“One's got red eyes... Drank too much, too little sleep or sick.” She elaborates.

The monastery is another thirty meters away and the top of the bell tower is up a flight of stairs five stories up. To a wyvern's eyes, as sharp as an eagle's, that wasn't far enough away. Abdren grits his

teeth as the situation seems to be slipping further and further out of control.

"Why so tense?" Laven says with a hint of mockery in his voice. "If we weren't here to talk, do you really think we'd come down and sit like this instead of just strafing the garden? Burning it down and you along with it? Maybe you thought we'd all just skip merrily through the swamp and be escorted up here with a dozen spear points pressing up against our backs?"

"That's quite enough, Mr. Laven." The Grand Cardinal interrupts. "I apologize for any rudeness or insult. These are dire times, and common courtesy is in short supply. I hope you can forgive us for that. But... It is about time we finally got down to business... The reason I have gone through the trouble and risk of bringing you here today is to warn you. I suspect convening of the Holy See is inevitable. The first Patriarch in almost a thousand years will be ordained."

Her lazy old eyes open and stare into Laven with their full intensity as she speaks her next words from the bottom of her heart.

"That would be... a disaster."

Laven takes a deep breath, soaking up her passion and judging if it was genuine before he is compelled to ask, "And why is that?"

"There is a man poised to take over that position. Grand Cardinal Ol'een. He is a radical. With the Emperor old and sick, with his sons squabbling and preparing to wage civil war for his throne; he'd be the most powerful and influential man in all the Empire with no equal... 'If' he were ordained as Patriarch."

The old woman could not sit still any longer as she worked herself up. She stands up and walks over to the flower gardens beside the table and inspects the various beautiful dew covered petals to calm herself as she continues. Laven turns in his chair and watches her, as does the wyvern, paladin and bishop. Her passion builds more and more while she talks.

"I know him. I've known him for more than thirty years. He'd call for a new Grand Crusade. This delicate peace we've had for forty years will be destroyed. He will march any soldier heeding his call and rallying under his banner into the fallen lands... The demon realms... He will not stop until he has burned and purged each one, then salt their fields. He'll slaughter everything in his path. He believes The Almighty will be on his side, that he will be privy to his words of wisdom and his will. With both, he has faith that victory will be assured. I cannot claim what our Lord's will is, only his word, but I know that even if he were to succeed... Hundreds of thousands... Millions of men, women, monsters and incubi will die. The monsters... The Demon Lord... They'll fight back. Their numbers will swell and Ol'een will fight

harder. It will create a vicious circle, and it will spiral out of control. He would sacrifice everything trying to put the world back to where it was."

The old woman turns away from the flowers and looks back at Laven. Rain soaks her grey hair; her robes turn dark red as they sponge up thousands of tiny droplets of water; all as light desperately tries to shine through the grey clouds above. Her appearance looks miserable, undignified but genuine. Like a wet dog her eyes are pleading. She is near her wit's end; and for the first time in a long time, she is letting it show.

"I must become Matriarch, Mr. Laven. I must hold that position till the day I die, so that I might stop him. War will not be the solution. The segregation between the Empire and the demon realms must be upheld. This peace must continue. I am sure... As the decades pass hatred will falter and reason will persevere. If it all goes to the hells again... It could be another two centuries before we get that chance at peace again."

Laven's fingers clank against the table stop, the steel encased fingers of his gauntlet drumming as he thinks.

"And how do you do that? And why do I matter?"

Laven's attention encourages the old woman as she continues, "The Holy See will vote. All the cardinals and grand cardinals from the world over will converge on the capital. They won't leave until the new head of the Church is elected. Ol'een is popular; he has many friends and allies. More so than I, but his hold is not perfect. If I can bring a prize, an accomplishment to bolster my own credibility, I stand a chance to defeat him."

"Still not answering my second question. Every time I have to deal with your church; it involves attempts on my life... A bunch of scattered parchments in the forest asking for 'parley' was a nice surprising change of pace, so I thought I'd give you guys another chance... Just this once."

"I shall confess; I was one of nine who ordered your assassination. However, I only did so because it was not politically expedient to do otherwise."

"And it's different now... how?"

"You're not dead." The Grand Cardinal says plainly.

Laven's face slackens as he is exasperated.

"No shit, I'm right here, aren't I?"

She ignores his foul language.

"The First of Nine... Grand Cardinal Ol'een was the one to put forward the motion. He is a man who has succeeded with everything he has set out to do for the last twenty years. For the first time in decades, what he has wanted to happen, ordered to happen, has not. I'd prefer that to keep happening."

The rogue shifts in his chair and sits upright. Laven's brows unfurrow, and with a neutral expression he really looks at the old woman for the first time, and he pays attention.

"The Green Reaper... It was a most... unexpected conclusion." She continues, struggling to find the right words. "But she's dead, and you are not."

Laven slumps back down in his seat, lays off the paladin and turns his attention back to the old woman. He takes a sharp breath, but keeps his lips shut. The old woman doesn't notice, nether does the paladin or the bishop. A thought bounces around inside his skull at the speed of light, and his eyes shift back and forth as he casts them down briefly at the table. He looks up and into the eyes of the one person still watching him closely; someone who knows what to watch. The wyvern, Christophaclies, stares back down at him. Her eyes are pleading, and she shakes her head ever so slightly.

Word of the Green Reaper's death has shaken the bishop visibly as well. It is not a widely known story. The Arch Assassins are a notoriously famous fairy tale. Hardly any proof or creditable eye witnesses can attest to their existence, but people know of them all the same. Not so far fetched stores about the lives they have ended and the feats required to do the deed are told in hushed voices in the corners of taverns. They are a boogeyman that terrify the people. Still, Laven remains silent. The real story might jeopardize his position even further. History would perhaps one day judge what happened at this table, but Laven makes his choice. He keeps his mouth shut.

The old woman speaks softly, "There are many that fear you are an Incubus Lord, yet... You do not behave as one. I believe we can come to an agreement and assist one another. A fair exchange... Mercenary work. I know the Thorn Knight would not be opposed, and it would not be unheard of for even me to pay for your services so long as the results are in the Church's interest. If you can foil Ol'een, I am confident you are more than capable of doing this task for me."

The point was long since driven home, so he interrupts to get her to move along, "Alright, next question... What's in it for me?" Laven asks.

"You do this for me, and I do something for you. Your ultimate goal is the Free Ports, correct? It would be the wisest choice. The safest place. Why else would you risk traveling through the heart of the Empire?... I will take on the risk of protecting you from the Church. When I am Matriarch, I will pardon you and let you do as you wish."

"Do I get that in writing?"

"I swear upon the Almighty, may he strike me down." She says holding a withered old hand over her heart. "For now... I am sure

you are tired, bruised, beaten. There is an alpine retreat for nobles in this corner of the Empire. I can arrange it to be empty for you... For three nights. You will need the rest..."

She says the last part rather cryptically, but Laven does not pick up on it.

Laven sighs, "With these witnesses... I suppose that's good as any coming from someone like you... Last question... What am I actually doing?"

A rare smile comes to the old woman's face, "The Empire is already on the brink of crisis. Groups that have hidden, been silent or inactive for decades are beginning to stir."

"Like Typhon?" Laven asks.

Laven's hand unconsciously slides down to his pant's pocket for a moment; something out of sight shimmers inside; where its blue light is absorbed by the dark blue dye of the denim. No one notices while the old woman keeps talking.

"And worse." the Grand Cardinal says ominously. "There have been many abductions in a town across the mountain passes three counties from here at the edge of the duchy... Mostly children."

Laven's face slackens, and he turns his attention to the old woman with a trace of disgust on his face. The steel of his gauntlet, which had been drumming before, scratches the tabletop.

"I need proof that it has been uprooted. Its leader, dead or alive, dragged into the light. I've had Abdren and others toil away for years without result. But you, I've heard all the rumors, and I believe you may be capable of doing it. I know you have all the allies necessary to make defeating them a reality. It is a splinter cell of a dangerous, pervasive and insidious organization allied to the Demon Lord. A fifth column. The Sabbath. The New Moon Sabbath."

Chapter 67

I don't think I could ever be faulted for not having much faith in this crazy world I've gotten myself mixed up in; however, when my guard is lowered I find myself overwhelmed by the beauty behind its ugliness. This beauty was there all along, of course, and I just had more dire concerns to contend with. It's a world caught in a tailspin, circling around a horrid era in human history. There are too many people busy plotting and scheming against one another when they should be working together. Too many people with extra time and resources on hand focus on lofty goals without a care for those who wallow underneath their ivory towers. Despite all that, there are still wonderful spring days like today. The clouds have all left, the sun is bright and warms the earth, yet the winds which swept them away still remain. Summer is coming to this world. I hope to remember moments like this when I start complaining about the heat.

Those gentle winds sweep over and past glacial cut mountains with snow capped tops. Pine covered slopes and verdant emerald fields fan out in all directions. A distinct smell of ozone lingers from the storm that rolled through this corner of the Empire, and it mixes with the dew, crisp mountain air, cedar sap, wet pine and blooming flowers. The whole place sits like a crown jewel of the empire. It's so far removed from the daily drudgery and lucid insanity that it must be a miracle keeping a deluge of refuges away. I would credit the rough terrain and limited living space between the sharp valleys as the reason. Even now, the sweet sound of birdsong fluttering about fills the hills with the sound of-

"Hey. Hey! I spy-" Rose's roughshod voice calls out.

"Dandelion." Minte's bored and barely audible voice interrupts.

Rose is stopped mid sentence and is frozen to the spot with her jaw slackened. The rest of us continue walking past where she had leaped out in front of the mantis with that playful carefree expression still chiseled on her face.

"Wha? How? I mean no- Laaaaaavennnnn~." She says, springing to life and pouting. "Tell her to stop cheating! I didn't even say the color yet."

-Idiocy... I can't help but sigh. Minte isn't cheating. I can't say for sure, but it has to be that her senses are just too keen. She follows Rose's head and eye movements and figures out what she's looking at before she even says anything. Just like she has- For. The. Last. Twenty. Times. Sometimes she answers right away, sometimes she waits a minute. I can't tell if she is actually playing along or just desperate for her to stop. Maybe she keeps switching between

ignoring the salamander or shutting her down right away while trying to find the magic formula to have her give up. Good luck.

Rose isn't dissuaded for long, and she stops fretting and jumps back into the breach. She runs, catches up with Minte and walks beside her, leaning over and looking up at her face with a wide grin on her face.

"I spy, with my little eye, something that is white!" She says, faster and louder than before, so she cannot be interrupted.

Minte's bored eyes slowly traverse from their thousand-yard stare to Rose at a millimeter per second.

"...Snow." She finally says.

"Ha, wrong! It was that cloud." Rose blurts out victoriously while pointing vigorously to the sky.

I think you're supposed to wait for them to give up first, Rose... Her intentions are paper thin.

The mantis takes it all in stride, with nothing more than a blunt, "...That so?"

Rose is blatantly lying. She has to be. I watched this time, and she had definitely not chosen the cloud beforehand. But I can't tell if Minte is angry, or if she doesn't actually suspect Rose cheating at all. The same stoic expression on her face hasn't budged, so it's impossible to know if she's actually paying any attention to Rose in the first place. It would be rude of her not to do so, but it would be understandable if she was. Susan—who is walking beside me—has the same exasperated expression on her face that I do. Yet, she too understands that this is the best alternative we have. If she were to stick her neck out and try to stop Rose, all she'd manage to do is remind her there was someone else to play her favorite marching game with.

"Why you!" Rose shouts out.

Rose pounces in front of Minte and pinches her cheeks with her claws. Susan and I stop moving while Rose tugs and pulls with a pissed off expression on her face. The little assassin offers no resistance even as her face is pulled and tugged in many strange and funny expressions. I think she actually lacks muscles to do half that on her own because I've never seen her lips pulled so far apart before. As if two fishhooks are caught in her mouth and are pulling in opposite directions. Her eyes are still just as dead as ever though, which makes the whole scene rather bizarrely jarring.

Minte mutters, slurred because of her cheeks being pulled, "...Ooow."

Expressionless except for her two feelers wriggling on top of her head that is. They're like a pair of second harmonic strings waving to and fro. Watching those things were the only reliable indication of

her mood, if you can decipher them. This one is particularly obvious; I'd say she's not that bothered, and that's why she isn't fighting back. I guess things are fine.

The two seem to be getting along... I think... I honestly can't tell. Is this bullying or part of an elaborate funny-man/straight-man routine they agreed to while I wasn't paying attention? Either way, it's an improvement to when they first met and when they 'met' after that. Minte may not show it, but there's a sweetheart underneath that cold exterior. I'm sure lunkhead Rose must have caught on to that by now. All you have to do is observe her, when you can, and you can see bits and pieces of it shine through that stone mask of hers. I think Rose was just prying into how friendly she can be, and if she can get any overt friendliness out of Minte.

Finding anything out about her is a labor all its own. Rummaging around in someone's dreams isn't an option available to most people. The assassin also has a penchant for simply vanishing for lengths at a time. But even though you can't see her; you can feel her watching you from not too far away. Her stealth and camouflage skills are second to none, and I've lost count to the number of times I've turned around, and she was standing behind me... Or appearing in front of me after I turned back around to check if she was behind me. Rose had been far more wary than any of us. She kept her eyes on the assassin like a hawk for days. After watching her for about a week, she had to admit the mantis's behavior isn't some part of an elaborate and, frankly, silly buttering up strategy to slice me apart when my guard is down. Her vanishing act seemed to just be a carry over; some bad old habits piggybacking on how she is just naturally shy.

Speaking of shy; Chris has been acting strange as of late. Even now she is circling the air high above us and only comes back to the group to report and debrief before taking off again. She's been doing this ever since we started hiking through the woods after our train was derailed. The playful banter and shenanigans only started back up one week ago, after all they heavy stuff we all had to deal with. But the wyvern seems to be stuck in a world of two weeks ago. A couple of days didn't bother me, but after the third I began to worry.

We were all surprised to find our path through the forest had been littered by pamphlet bombing. Hundreds of parchments requesting our presence at Kneljewl. After hearing the place was a swamp with only three roads leading in, I figured it was an obvious trap, but I couldn't let the chance to talk to one of the Church's highest officials slip by. I needed to know what she wanted. There was a chance I could get something worthwhile out of it... Maybe... But instead of walking into an ambush I opted for plan B, riding in from the sky. I hoped it would also give me a chance to talk with Chris alone,

but she was tight lipped the whole way there and back. It also doesn't help that she's been covering her face with that torn shirt of mine. She can have it; I don't need it, but I still find her behavior odd. On top of it all, when she does speak it's usually something weird like her mind is on another planet. That alone isn't jarring; her head is always up in cloud nine, and her perception of reality is skewed by her childishly twisted world view... But she's usually chipper, not somber like she is now.

I catch myself looking up at the sky where Chris circles above. When I look down, I notice Shoshanah has been watching me. Concern had to be plain as day on my face, and we seem to be sharing the same thought. Her gaze looks upward to Chris as well before coming back down to me. I can tell from her expression there is something she wants to share, but it isn't something we can talk out in public like this. The anubis has the ability to look into the hearts of others; if there was anyone who would have insight into what was plaguing the poor girl and robbing us of her playful boisterous laugh, it was her.

After the roughhousing between Rose and Minte finishes, we continue up the forest path that coils its way toward heaven. Dirt paths and carved stone steps, it was like a stairway leading to a mountain temple, but it was just past noon now, and my thighs are already burning while my feet throb on the soles of my boots. Every step was uphill, and the path wasn't wider than three people walking shoulder to shoulder. On the left is a sheer cliff face, and on the right, except for some trees clinging to the side of the mountain, was a full stop. Nothing but air and a long trip downward. There was a promised reward at the end of all this, so I was told.

It's just another potential ambush. I would not put it past the Church to have pulled a fast one. They hadn't exactly portrayed themselves as pleasant people, at least to me. Their social housing projects and charities to save the common folk were admirable, but I had been exposed to its dark underbelly one too many times. If it weren't for the flying scout, the keen senses, the peerless warrior and the genius in my company I would have that old woman shove it, but now I feel safe enough to take that kind of risk. I know I need it, a way out. I know I want it, something, some goal to rely on. So I wanted that meeting to be real. Our bushwhacking had to come to an end at some point. There has to be an unwinding before we finally snap.

We slog our way to the top of the mountain where we are greeted by long thin canyon carved out of the mountain. Without a word, Minte leaps into action. The path is only six or so meters apart, but it is also about fifty meters high on each side. The girl clings to one side with her hands and feet then spring-boards off to the other side to

kick off again and again in an amazing acrobatic feat. If there was ever a better opportunity to shoot us like fish in a barrel or roll boulders, it was now. But the assassin is already familiar with such tricks, so as she climbs and bounces off the walls toward the top. Rose, Susan and I continue walking.

"This doesn't appear natural," I say.

Susan's ear twitches, and her curious yet passively delighted face turns toward me, "Whatever would bring you to that conclusion?"

I looked at the strata rock sitting one on top of the other.

"If this had been naturally formed, it wouldn't be so free from erosion. It had to be recent. It wasn't a flow of molten rock or water, and this isn't the work of a glacier."

"That is because this path was chiseled loose utilizing magic," the anubis declares. "A great deal of it. One explosion and earth shaping spell after the other. The cost in reagents alone... Would be staggering."

With her claws resting on the back of her head, Rose chimes in lazily, "That's because some nobles ain't got anything better to do with their money. Not like they were all fighting wars all the time."

"Spending all their money on what?" I ask.

But the answer came to me soon enough without another word said. At the end of the path the world opened up. Nestled in its own little valley, a secluded little world in what looked like a caldera, was a glacial lake. We had stumbled onto a peaceful plateau where a pure blue lake, green fields with blooming flowers, towering pines and snow capped hills. Sitting next to the lake, which took up a third of the caldera, was a huge log villa. I could swear I've seen scenes like this before from a travel brochure to the Austrian Alps. The whole place radiated serenity.

I took in a long breath of mountain air, and I almost forgot to exhale. Even Susan and Rose were hit with the same feeling, and we all shared a suspended moment in time. We all exhaled at the same time, and our jaws dropped at the remarkable beauty of the tiny alpine oasis. Minte appeared beside us after dropping down from above; and even though her expression didn't change, the antenna on top of her head seemed to dance back and forth as they felt the air, and her eyes took in the sights. Even Chris descended from above, landed behind us all and took in the sight.

"Didn't see anything," Minte states dryly.

"Not a soul around," Chris says, muffled by her scarf.

"Well then," I say, struggling to look away from the view and find just a few simple words for everyone. "I'd say we break and check this place out,"

With a flutter of wind Chris takes off without another word

toward the villa. Minte vanishes without a trace. Rose's stomach growls, and she hobbles her way down the path toward the villa with Susan only just behind her. I follow them all from behind, but my eyes are drawn to the crystal clear lake instead. It appears to be fed from a couple streams of glacial runoff coming from a waterfall with its source being the ice locked and trapped high above us. I step off the path and walk down to the quickly moving stream. To my left is the rocky shore of the lake and in front of me the clear colorless stream.

I run my hand through it. It's perfectly clear spring water. I look up the stream and see nothing suspicious so I hazard a cupped palm full of the water and drink it down. An icy chill of pure water spreads from my throat to the rest of my body. I close my weary eyes and let the relaxing feeling sink in. My body feels at peace; a feeling I have not felt for quite some time. I sit my butt down on the ground, and I yank my swollen feet free from the confines of my boots and toss them aside. All that frantic effort exhausts me of the last bit of my strength; and when my left foot comes free with a pop, I fall over onto my back and sprawl out among the grass and flowers.

The gentle sound of the trickling stream and the wind blowing through the short green grass around my head coax my eyes shut. My throbbing feet plant themselves in the cool water of the stream, and I can feel the muscles and ligaments snarled beyond recognition slacken and loosen up. Butterflies and harmless fuzzy bees bumble about around me and add their own sound to the symphony. The cheerful chirping of the birds—whom I had forgotten but never left—join them. A struggle takes place between my waking mind and my heavy eyelids, and my mind loses a few times. This little alcove in the world seems so isolated that I might have had a few dreamless sleeps in a row as I lay there napping and never known it. The wind and water is chilly, but the light out of the shade feels just as warm as the late summer sun.

But as I lay there, and the worries of the world wash away, I finally remember the littler things in life; the things that concern just me and no one else. Caked layers of dirt and sweat and my matted hair cover me like a thick layer of dust. I can't stand it any longer, so I sit back upright and begin to remove my cloths. With nothing but my boxers on I walk out into the lake. There are no sandy beaches, no silt or sandy lake bottom; there are only thousands of fist sized rocks. My feet are already acclimatized to the cold, but as the water reaches past my knees and up to thighs I feel a chill spread throughout my body. I watch the mud and dirt peel off, and that clean feeling far outweighs the chill.

Muscles in my legs seize up, but just as readily slacken. Heat rising from my core meets the heat of the sun, and the freezing glacial

water tempers it all. I bend down and cup the lake water in my hands and splash my face. Muddy water trickles off my face as my eyes shoot wide awake as the cold water is like a slap in the face. Emboldened, I dunk my head into the water like a drinking bird and soak my entire head at once. I run my hands through the wet hair and shake loose all the matted clumps of dirt and knotted hair. When I flick my head backward and take a deep breath I hear someone else wandering closer.

A cheery tenor meanders down toward the lake's edge, no doubt without looking where it's going, while humming a happy little tune. I take two fingers and open the wet bangs hanging over my eyes like a pair of curtains and spot Rose cradling a whole leg of raw ham in her arms. A whole ham with a big oversize bite mark already missing from it. When she does finally open her eyes and spots me almost naked standing in the lake she finally stops just short of the lake itself. I have a bit of a nostalgic feeling about it all. Her eyes go a little wide because she almost spaced out right into the water; but when she spots me, she blushes fiercely then smiles.

“H-hey!” She blusters.

“...Hey.” I reply calmly.

My face also no doubt blushing as well. I can feel the heat, and I shouldn't since the water is so cold.

“Watcha doing?” Rose asks while the rest of her body fidgets.

“Taking a dip. The water is nice and cool.”

“O-oh? Is that all? Ha ha ha,” She laughs awkwardly to herself. “Well, I'll just be-”

She turns on the spot, on one heel, like a robot. But I stop her, reaching my hand out toward her.

“Hold on, Rose.”

I didn't expect her to stop, but she does with one leg comically still in the air and looking like she could lose her balance at any second. A stray thought crossed my mind. Back at Lake Anthren she had been freaking out at the water. I felt compelled to do something about that while I had the chance.

“The water is nice.” I repeat myself, invitingly.

“Ah ha~” She laughs nervously. “I'm sure it is, but I'll just-”

I feel a little mischievous and brave, so I push my luck, “You're not afraid, are you?”

Rose's leg comes stomping down, her claw pounds the dirt, her 'hands' ball into fists and her temper flares. Her tail begins to smoulder and crackle behind her.

“I'm not afraid of anything!” She shouts, put then her cheeks puff out and pout in a girlishly

I shrug my shoulders and raise my palms into the air, “Just saying~~ I'm right here if you're worried. You can hold my hand if you want.”

I teased her a bit. Just a bit of revenge for the harsh martial lessons she thrusts onto me every chance she gets.

“You think I can't swim?” She says accusingly from the shore.

I lay the sarcasm on thick, “Oh, I never implied that at all.”

She puffs out her chest, “Y-yeah? That so? Well, watch me!”

Her claws scramble in a rush to the straps and buckles holding her armor and pouches to her body. One by one they clatter and slump to the ground in a heap, just next to my pile of clothes. I watch as she strips; and even though she doesn't do it sensually or with the slightest grace, I feel my heart pump a little faster and uncomfortably in my chest.

I still do just as she asks though. I watch her.

At last she's only wearing the black bikini like underwear. But she still stands at the edge of the lake with her arms held tight and immobile at her sides. Her claws bunch up in fists, and there's a deep red blush across her face. There is an awkward pause while I stare at the bronzed beauty on the shore while her eyes look down at the little waves wash back and forth over the rocky beach. After about half a minute she looks up quickly with... are they little tears welling up in the corners of her eyes?... Anyways, she looks right at me with a red, displeased and impatient face.

“Hand,” She mumbles.

“What?” I have to ask.

“Your hand!” She shouts, embarrassed.

It dawns on me quickly. My face heats up just like hers instantly. I wade back over to the shore and hold my hand out to the girl, and she cautiously places her talons on the first couple phalanxes of my fingers. I curl my fingers up and lock her claw in the palm of my hand. As I back up slowly, I have to pull her gently as her feet cling to the shore, but she doesn't resist enough to stop me from pulling her into the water. A shiver travels from her legs and spreads out over her entire body like a cartoon character. I didn't think those scales on her arms and legs could even move like that. I half expected her long red ponytail to go rigid and stick straight up into the air. Her fiery crocodile tail does just that though. Flames spurt and grow twice as large for a second, and my hand, for just a moment, felt like I had placed it on a hot stove before the warmth safely spreads through my whole body instead.

“See? Not so bad.” I say.

Rose is too busy biting on her lower lip to respond.

I keep walking backward and eventually the water is just short of my waist. So long as I'm holding onto her tight she seems unlikely to complain like I expected her to. The further I walk out into the water the higher her tail lifts up into the air behind her. I keep walking further and further backwards till the water is up to my chest. Her body is shaking a little now; I can feel it. Her tail rises higher and higher, but she can only curl it like that enough to keep a quarter of it above the water line. The flame on her tail rises higher. Compensating for the length of tail it can't burn on? Because there's a flame towering up behind her head, it looks very much like a flare stack burning on the top of an oil well.

"You need to head back?" I ask.

"N-no! I'm okay!" She blurts out, very obviously not okay.

"You're keeping your tail out of the water. If it's a problem we can head-"

"I don't need to keep it out of the water!... It's just more comfortable that way..." Rose mumbles.

I tilt my head curiously.

"It'll still burn. But it's like... Like I can't breathe... And I so can swim too!"

"So it's okay if I let go then-"

"No no no NO!" She panics, shouting and flailing.

She reflexively tries to pull me forward while throwing herself at me, but all it does is put me off my balance. These fist sized stones are very slippery, and I walked out slowly not just for her, but just so I wouldn't slip and fall over as well. I let go of her hand while one of my legs shoots out, and I fall over backwards into the water. The last thing I hear before the crash of water is Rose shrieking out my name.

After I sink a bit, my vision pieces the crystal clear water perfectly. I can hear a faint voice, but the rush of bubbles and troubled waters block it out mostly. I hover peacefully in the water for a few seconds and look back up. The waves and ripples dies down quickly, and I can now see the late afternoon sun and the lens flare like effect as it refracts off the lake's surface. My eyes are drawn by the stronger gravity well of Rose's ample under boob. I smile as a warm calming feeling consumes me. After all, the sensation of faux weightlessness is very relaxing. But I decide with better judgement that Rose's thrashing about it not because she's enjoying herself.

I kick my legs to propel myself in circle around behind Rose, dodging her trashing tail, to resurface behind her. The deep breath I take causes her to jump, and she spins around with teary eyes to met me. I open my mouth to say something, but Rose tackles me instead. Her hot and wet body presses up against me while her arms wrap around my neck. A pair of large breasts squish against my chest; two

rock hard nubs poking clearly through the fabric of her top only enhance the sensation. I almost fall over backwards again, but I hold my ground.

"Idiot!" She shouts, her mouth right beside my ear; my cochlea shudders, and I almost lose my balance again.

Rose is upset now, and I know for sure because after hugging me tightly she grabs me by the shoulder and pushes me back down into the water. The back of my head crashes against the waves, but this time I just float there instead. I can't help but lay there laughing and I'm sure Rose doesn't appreciate that at all. I was just showboating now.

"You said you wouldn't let go!" She shouts.

"You got more kick than I do, Rose. How am I supposed to hold on when you do that?"

She went quiet; she didn't really have a retort to that.

"But to think~" I say with a mocking drawl. "The great and mighty Thorn Knight can't swim~"

I start gently kicking with my legs and throw my arms back to do the backstroke. Round and round Rose I start swimming while she remains in the middle, spinning around so she can keep shouting right at me.

"I so too can swim! Water's just different..." She pouts.

"Not in water?" I say, unable to hide my confusion.

She puffs out her chest with pride, "That's right. Any salamander worth her scales can do three laps inside a volcano before breaking a sweat. You think YOU can do that? Huh?"

Swimming in a volcano? Bathing in lava?... Now things were starting to make sense. I stop swimming and touch my feet back down on the lake floor beside her.

"You can swim in molten rock?" I ask skeptically.

"Of course. Our kind were born in it."

So all that excess body heat reaching into the hundreds and even thousands of degrees is all to survive in lava? The laws of nature that ruled this world were different; that's for sure. I suppose with a little magic it wouldn't be so far fetched.... I couldn't believe it, but that was just common sense that comes in handy from my world getting in the way.

"So yeah, I can swim. Water's just different. I sink."

Well, if you weigh too much and are too dense, of course you'll sink. That's just he laws governing buoyancy, and I've seen no reason to think that law doesn't apply here. If you're used to swimming in something as dense as molten rock, with the upward force it would have... trying to stay afloat in water is a completely different set of rules you need to be used to.

“Is that all? Come on, give me your hands.” I say while I hold out both my own.

Rose looks at my skeptically, so I moved back closer to the shore. She finally relents, and I start pulling her back to the shore.

“Stop walking and get your feet off the floor.”

“What?”

Better to show her than explain. I yank her forward and jump back as well. She falls forward and face plants into the water. Before she can get her footing back I continue to trawl her along. I refuse to let go of her claws, her tail swishes violently out of the water behind her, and her legs thrash the water into white waves behind her. Steam begins to rise from the water around her, and it actually starts to boil.

Her face is still looking down into the water, and I don't think she had a chance to breathe, so I call out to her, “Lift your head up! Breathe! Kick your legs!”

Rose's head tilts back, and she takes in a huge gasp of water; her face is too scared to be furious and she's still thrashing.

“Stop thrashing about! You're gonna sink like that. Calm down and kick your legs, I got you!”

Thankfully she listens. She stops thrashing and kicks her legs, and her body sticks to the surface of the water.

“See? You're doing it.”

Between gasping breathes, when her face goes back under the waves, she shouts out, “I'm gonna... get you... Laven!”

I escalate my teasing.

“I'm gonna let go now. Throw your arms out like you're gonna crawl. Do it all and you won't sink.”

“No! Don't let go.... Don't let... go!” She panics, thrashing about

I slacken my grip a bit, which causes her to freak out even more; but instead of letting go, I lift her up. The water is already down past my knees, and if she went any further she'd scrape her pretty face against the rocks. She shrieks a little when I pull her out of the water, and she collapses against my chest.

“See? Not so ba-”

A fist hits me in the jaw, and I almost bite my tongue. The solid hit sends me stumbling backward, and I fall over back onto the grass. It didn't hit me that hard, but it surprised me. I rub my cheek and look up at Rose still standing up to her ankles in the lake. She looks pissed, but she's still beet red in the face with tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. When I look at her, I can't help it, and I laugh. She's not so happy at first, but she eventually starts laughing as well.

I lay back on the ground for a while longer while my sides split and share a moment with Rose until we both regain our composure. I

look back up at her, and she's wiping away the tears in the corners of her eyes with a finger, the sun shining behind her back as I lay in her long shadow. She's still glistening wet, and steam rises from her body and the lake around her feet. Her eyes look down at me, and she gives me a wide, soft and genuine smile. It's a good thing she has sense of humor. Even if she was a latecomer to the punchline.

"So?... Not so tough, is it? Miss Fearless... Wanna race across the lake?"

The smile slowly turns into a frown on her face, then her stomach grumbles, loudly.

"Ahahaha, well look at that!" She says, waving her arms about. "I gotta take care of this."

She pats her flat, taut stomach as it growls once more. I look over at the partially eaten ham on top of all her clothes.

"No no no, that's not nearly enough; all that swimming really cooled me down. Gonna have to refuel... Big time. Right away... See ya later!"

With that she rushes past me, swoops down and collects all her belongings, the ham too, then breaks off into a sprint back toward the villa. There's even a dust cloud trail behind her... Now I find myself alone again, but I'm a little too worked up to relax again. I lay in the sun for a bit to dry off then dress myself. With the leather jerkin slung over my shoulder, I make my way to the villa as well.

I follow the lake instead of rushing straight toward the villa, so I happen to come across Susan lounging by the dock. A wide umbrella blocks out the sun while she lays down on a wooden sun chair. Next to her is a small table half covered in two towers of books with a bottle of red wine and a half full glass next to it. Her eyes scan each page with frightening speed, finishing a page within seconds and flipping the page with her claw in no less than ten seconds each time. She has shed her 'pants' and heavy gold ornaments and jewelry, except for the purplish-black string panties and skin tight crop top, although they're both still embroidered and laden with their own intrinsic gold and jewelry.

Susan doesn't sense my approach until my shadow is in her line of sight. Without even bookmarking where she was, she closes the book and rests it on her stomach. Then she looks up and greets me.

"Good afternoon, Laven. I presume you have had sufficient time to relax?"

"If even you're able to relax, then so am I." I reply.

Hey eyebrows furrow a bit, but she lets the jab slide, and her eyes soften back up after she sighs.

"Found the library?" I ask, motioning with my gaze toward the book in her paws.

“Yes,” She says while looking at the pile of books beside her. “I am gathering all the information possible on this Sabbath that I can.”

“On the first day? I said we should all take a break.”

“This IS my break,” Susan says. “Bird song in the air, abundant fresh air... Peace and quiet.”

Can't argue with the last one...

“The vintage is not to royal standards, but it shall suffice," She says, motioning her paw toward the red liquid beside her.

She casts her gaze downward.

"Perhaps... Perhaps...”

She's suddenly at a loss for words. Her gaze averts from mine, and she begins to lay uneasily in the chair. The furry tufts of her knees rub together as the smooth skin of her tanned thighs slide past one another. She mutters something I can't quite make out. I have to ask her to repeat herself.

“Stay!...” She blurts out, then coughs and brings her voice under control. “If, perchance, you are not busy... Perhaps you'd fancy... joining me?”

“I guess I could...” I muse. “But it's been hours since I've had something to eat... I know! How about I bring you back something?”

I was just being courteous, but she brings the book back to her face and hides behind it. I notice her tail, which she slipped through one of the wooden back panels of the sun chair, was wagging back and forth. The ears on the stop of her head twitch every few seconds too.

“I would like that,” She says.

“I assume you've already found where they keep the food. I saw Rose walking around with a whole leg of ham earlier.”

She lets out another sigh, drops the book back down on her lap and rests her head back against the back of the chair.

“Yes, we did. Although I had to inform that glutton numerous times that while there was enough food left for four individuals; there are five of us. And while that is no paltry sum of foodstuffs, it is not enough to sate her endless and ravenous hunger if she refuses to keep it in check.”

Her anger grows more and more the longer she stews on that train of thought... Food for four though, huh?

“That one would be my fault...” I say.

“Do not fret, Laven,” She says sincerely, calming her anger instantly. “Although it is impossible to know whether you made the right decision; you have not chosen the wrong one either. We do not know this 'Grand Cardinal's' motivations or thought processes. Not enough to know how she would react to such scandalous news on the level of

the 'Green Reaper's' treason. For Minte's sake, it is best she is now given the peace of mind that not being hounded by these 'Arc Assassins', and their handlers, allows her."

"You're right... Anyways, what do you want? Before Rose gets to it."

"I'll take- Wait..." Susan lowers her book so fast she nearly throws it, and then her head mechanically turns to look at me. "Say again?"

"Last I saw Rose, her stomach was grumbling, and she was no doubt heading to-"

Her face slackens as something dire dawns upon her.

"Oh no... That... That... AAAAH!"

The book in Susan's paw flies up into the air, and she leaps off the sun chair. Before the book manages to hit the ground, I jump forward to catch it, but by then she is already running back into the villa, shouting and swearing in some other language the whole way. I was just standing there in the dust cloud she left behind, so I decide to just lay the book down on the tower and walk away. It's better she deals with it. That's what I'll tell myself.

I scratch the back of my head as I turn toward the villa myself. It sits above the rocky beach and dock, above another level where there seems to be a garden. A fine path of cut from stone stairs leads the way. Between the garden of flowers, I spot someone who had all but vanished a few hours earlier. Minte was squatting in the garden with her eyes fixated on something. It's odd to see something hold her complete rapt attention. I knew that much because she didn't seem to notice as I approach her from behind. Even the feelers on top of her head haven't yet turned in my direction. I get close enough to look over her shoulder and see her poking at a beetle crawling over the garden soil. Gently, and never touching it, but merely guiding it on some sort of path.

"Minte, wh-?"

'Snick-schwing!' A long green blade snaps into place on her right wrist, and the razor sharp tip of it comes just a hair's width from my jugular. I freeze on the spot. Minte's eyes are wide open, and she's breathing heavily, but she notices its me after just a couple of seconds. She deflates; but even through her stoic expressionless face, I can feel the pain in her eyes. Her long arm blade swings back into place against her forearm with a second 'snick', and she huddles up into herself even more than before.

"Minte, it's okay. I shouldn't have scared you like that. It's alright."

She quickly turns her head away and back down at the soil, but the beetle she had been watching has long since gone. She looks

back and forth for it, but gives up after a couple of seconds. Her shoulders slump even further. I can sense the aura of despondence radiating off her. I don't think words will be enough, so I squat down next to her and put my hand on the top of her head, between the base of her antennae. I slowly ruffle her brown hair as I pat her head. It doesn't get much of a reaction, but any reaction is a lot from her. Her feelers shoot straight up into the air then twist around before pointing directly at me. She slowly turns her head to look up at me.

"Everything won't be better right away. But we'll work on that. Okay? I'm not hurt, so don't worry about it."

She continues to look up and into my eyes without so much as a smile or a frown, but the antennae on her head poke and prod my forehead and cheeks, so I'll take that as good enough. I flash her a smile.

"I think our pantry might get a bit bare. Thanks to Rose. If you really gotta make it up to me, maybe go find something and bring it back. I'm sure it would spare Susan a few more grey hairs as well. Don't miss dinner though, we'll throw something together and eat together. Okay?"

Minte nods once. I take my hand off the top of her head, and she stands back up and walks into the shrubbery, melting into and disappearing without a trace. When I feel she's finally left, I let out a huge lung emptying sigh.

"Why is it so much work to just relax?"

I stand up, dust myself off and continue up the stairs toward the villa.

Chapter 68

My mind had been wrestling with numbers ever since we got here. It was like a terrible itch which only got worse when I walked through the rear entrance. Just how much money had been funneled into this remote getaway? My eyes had been treated to the sight of hand carved columns of hardwood that support the walls and roof. And that was just me walking through the door. Each one was imported and had been dragged up this mountain because there was only pine for as far as the eye could see. All the stones were smooth cut, and the wooden floorboards never creaked. The ceilings were high, and the insides of the villa were overtly spacious. This wasn't some townhouse nor simple country house. Someone built this place for peak opulence. Just being inside its walls and knowing it is here for us to do with as we wish haunted me with an insidious pang of guilt.

My body, however, was far too weary for that to be the dominant feeling churning inside me. My nerves and muscles were so snarled, frayed, twisted and worn. I've been dead tired for days. I was only a few hard knocks away from being broken, so the atmosphere of this oasis was a god send. The very air felt as though it was healing me. A rogue thought in the back of my head kept calling out for attention. It screamed that I should be cautious and that I should continue to keep on guard. It didn't care in the slightest that my stretched nerves could snap at any moment. Besides, my senses were nothing compared to the girls, so I decided to put my trust in them.

They are better canaries in the mine shaft than I ever would be. I'd stop worrying about imminent death, and worse, for now. Now was the time to recover. It was time to take a deep breath and debate all my options. We have only just enough time to get comfortable before we have to move out again. There is a wide world out there, and most of it has proven itself unfriendly... To say the least... But I'd forget about the rest today. I can offer myself that one tiny luxury. If they were all in agreement that we were safe for the moment, we were. Period.

When I brought my mind back from out of the clouds, I heard the sound of a heated argument in some far away corner of the villa. How heated? It must be bouncing off and passing through half a dozen walls to reach my ears. The more I listen, the more it sounded like a lecture than an argument. I could make out Susan's haughty and irate voice. It was laden with castigation and a tinge of fury. Every so often I heard the rare murmur of someone else's voice. Rose was laughing and retorting back. My guess is that Susan's warpath led her to the pantry or cellar which Rose had been plundering unchecked for the past fifteen or so minutes. I'm just going to steer clear of that mess.

As I continued to walk the halls I studied the art and

decorations. There was no shortage of oil paintings, and while I couldn't possibly know their true value, it had to be astronomical. One in particular caught my eye: a wide panoramic view of an ancient looking city. A romantic painting with hard colors. A Roman like ruin rising out of the plains and built upon a bunch of isolated hills. It was separated from the world as it stood behind massive walls. Two bright lights illuminate the landscape: one being the sun and the other a heavenly host traversing the sky on top the clouds far above the city. Angels, cherubs and the source of the second light, a massive nine point golden star. The radiant and impressive halo behind it gave its identity away immediately.

When I looked closer at the city, I noticed there was whole other city growing out from within it. Wooden thatched roofs and the like sprung up from the collapsing stone ruins. It all seemed so appropriate given everything I've seen of this world so far. It was as though a civilization was growing within the confines of a predecessor's skeletal corpse. The painting did not seem that old, so I suppose it is a recent depiction of wherever this was. The artist's intention was probably elsewhere, but what I saw is a microcosm that explained what this whole Empire is about.

It's not the obvious homage to the one they call 'The Almighty' that has caught my mind's eye; it's the massive monuments that could never be built by the Empire. Towers that loom high above the city and rival the skyscrapers I am more familiar with. Palaces, temples, fortresses and more... they look as though each has been preserved through eons. There are layers to this world I cannot begin to understand. But therein lies the problem. If there were clues to how and why I am here and why I can't remember who I am, who I was... The answers to those mysteries are locked within walls like those in the painting. From a time long forgotten. Just like the illustrations in that book Susan found back in that library weeks ago.

"Times long forgotten, huh?" my voice utters aloud.

There's nothing to be gained from thinking too hard about it. I've learned that much this spring. But I'm enjoying the relaxation of exercising my gray matter instead of my red matter. My arms and legs feel like they are one fire and my knees and back feel forty years too old. I've been waging my own little war inside my head for some time now. Tossing a few bread crumbs for the stray thoughts was a good way to keep them occupied. And distracted. What has torn my mind apart isn't just some case of a bump on the head amnesia. When I try to fish around for memories it isn't like I'm stumbling through the fog and hoping I'll bump into something. No, I keep following worn trails on a clear day which lead to the sea. But what I had once built on that coast has been eroded away, reclaimed by the dark blue waters. What

lies beyond those water, or under the waves, I don't know. I probably shouldn't ever know, if I knew what was good for me. Sadly, given where I am now, I'm not even smart enough for that.

...I can picture a skyscraper in my head. All the steel, glass and concrete is as clear a memory to me as the hardwood of this villa. When I try to imagine myself standing in front of one, or in one, I cannot recall a single thing. My memories are just a collection of 'things'. Where I should be in them, there are only holes. It is as if I were a ghost in all of them.

There's an image of a four wheeled cart in my head. It sits on rubber wheels, and its body is made of steel and fiberglass. Inside, there's an engine that turns tiny explosions into mechanical energy. That spins the wheels, and the whole thing moves. I can imagine it all. I see it as clearly as I would a horse-drawn carriage. But try as I might, I cannot see myself inside one. I cannot recall a single memory of myself behind the steering wheel, nor can I recall something traumatic like almost being hit by one. You typically don't forget something like that. I know that world is there. It is. It must be. That world of mine is real, or I'm crazy. But this kind of crazy is far too lucid.

My heart starts beating faster in my chest. I can feel my breathing slowly going out of control as I meander through the empty spacious halls of the villa. A thousand thoughts and doubts are at the gates of my psyche once again. Just what would I be doing now if things had gone just a little differently? If I ignore the orcs, the amazons... Even Rose... Where would I have ended up? Would I be bouncing off the walls of some other villa as I stride quickly through its hallways? No, I doubt that. Would I have stumbled upon civilization at all? Perhaps I'd just starve and dehydrate in the wilderness. Would I have gotten cholera and died miserably in the forest of the Northern Wastelands? Maybe I'd stumble upon a farm and be forced to till the fields for some shitty pebble laden bread to eat? More than likely I'd end up as one of these shiftless vagabonds held up in a church's boarding house.

Maybe if I got my hands on some copper and zinc I could set up the most basic of electrochemical cells. When you're in doubt, invent electricity... Then again, there are people in this world who can just wiggle their fingers and produce bolts of lightning from their hands. If I got unlucky, maybe I'd end up burned at the stake instead of just being laughed at. It all just added to the feeling that I don't belong here. A feeling that makes me certain these rogue thoughts could never have formed from just observing this world.

Before I knew it, I had found my way outside. The cool mountain air tickled my sinuses and calmed my soul. I had been just short of running, but I returned to a more leisurely gait. I passed

through a covered boardwalk that appeared to lead to a separate building. It looked just as fanciful on the outside, but when my curiosity lead me inside, I saw how bare bones and utilitarian it truly is. There were no fancy rugs, art or decorations. The floorboards were softwood as was the entire interior. Rooms which were dedicated bedrooms were filled with bare bone bunk-beds and little room for personal effects. A common room was no more impressive; the whole side house was unimpressive. It was a stark comparison to the halls which I had walked through before. That's how this world works though. My memories of that demon realm we passed through weeks ago appears less atrocious every time I bear witness to places like this.

It was just the servant's house. Only there were no servants. That was for the better. I'm sure they'd just flee in a panic if they had stayed behind. At least they gave the whole place one last clean before they left.

I continued through the house until I came, at last, upon the single largest room in the building. Counters, furnaces, shelves, cabinets, hearths and the like populated it. A wafting scent was doomed to overflow from the room and strike me with great force the moment I had opened the door. Spices. Dozens of spices from countless jars arrayed neatly everywhere in the room. It muffled the scent of spoiling meat stored in the closets. Enough seemed to be already salted and dried, but the place had definitely been restocked before our arrival. This is an age before refrigeration after all. It seemed a magic item to keep things cool was either out of the budget, or the person who would be in charge of maintaining it wouldn't fit on the pay roll.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the smells. I could pick out bay leaves, cayenne, cinnamon, pepper, rosemary, thyme, salt and more. I suppose there wasn't an Ottoman Empire sitting between this Empire and half the world's spices. All the luxuries of the world seemed to be concentrated in this one location. But there was also the fact that these plants, or ones exactly like them, existed in this place at all. I had taken humans and human-like creatures for granted, but when I thought about it, it was just too absurd a coincidence. Yet the spices were enough to bring tears to my eyes. Every sniff I took caused emotions to bubble up from inside me. I had to take a few deep breaths to calm myself. Why was this happening now? Even now my hands were shaking and my heart rate had increased. I had just escaped this feeling only a few minutes ago, but it was back again.

Scent is linked strongly to memory. I know that much. The olfactory bulbs are right next to the amygdala, so one smell can bring about a rush of vivid memories. Emotional memories. But there was something missing. Rather, everything was missing. It wasn't a wall I

could break through or scale; it was an abyss that every smell was driven into then never seen again. There was a feeling but no substance to be found. I was on the verge of a memory. Yet there was nothing, not fog obscuring something. It had been torn out completely.

I was being overwhelmed by compulsion. I obsessively paced the kitchen and started gathering various utensils and containers. Flour, salt, fresh eggs. A coping mechanism for the stress? I found a whole side of beef which was quite fresh and barely spoiled at all. I gathered container after container off the shelves. Time seemed to slip away from me. Flour with the salt. Add the eggs and mix. Knead the result. I reached for a knife from an assortment of them. I held the knife tentatively on the surface of the beef I had gathered. My hands paused, but I took a deep breath to calm myself, and I sink the steely edge into the flesh and begin to separate it from the bone. I trust myself over to a feeling and let my conscious mind slip away for a time.

There was no earthly way of knowing what I was doing or where I was going. The smell of a spice cocktail was driving me onward. I looked over the dormant fuel within the furnaces and hearths. Primitive ovens and stoves. An apparatus that I can hang a large black cauldron from. Boiling water and a crackling flame underneath. An oven and stove heating the gray stones to a dull orange. I seized fresh greens resting in still partially chilly spring water then broke and chopped them up. The dough I had forgotten about... My hands made sheets as I pounded and thinned it against the counter. Something was coming together.

A sizzle of meat caught my attention, and I rushed over to browning beef in the furnace. It was covered in a mixture of spices, and dripped over it was a golden honey-like sauce. I pulled it carefully from the glowing stones, and my hands were a flurry of activity. It was instinctual. Memories from my muscles and a feeling all alone spurred me onward. It was as though I were painting something from memory. Layers of cut dough and uncooked meat. Rolled into balls and pressed shut then boiled and fried. A cheese wheel I grated and shredded. The smell of spices, wine, oils, roasted meat, boiled and fried dough filled the kitchen. Before I knew it, I finally stopped, and the counters were covered with food. It caused my own mouth to salivate.

My eyes drifted upward at last to the entrance of the kitchen and standing there watching me were Susan's red eyes. There was a slight smile on her face, but her eyes were wistful. It was a complex expression on her face. When our eyes met, they didn't look into each other right away, but very quickly she realized I was no longer in a trance. She blushed and looked away briefly before regaining her composure and making eye contract once again.

"...What time is it?" I asked.

"The sun has just set, Laven," She responds.

Given how low the sun was in the sky when I got here, two... maybe even three hours have slipped away from me.

"I dared not interrupt you. You appeared possessed... Determined."

"You might say that," I sigh as I slump down on a chair behind me.

A few awkward moments pass. I breathe deeply and stare downward at the wet, flour-covered floor. The sound of claws, Susan's paws, clacking against stone emanate as she approaches. She stands beside me, her eyes study the steaming entrees arrayed on the counter and her dainty nose sniffs the aroma wafting from each full bowl, plate and platter. Susan's cheeks turn an even deeper shade of red while her eyes moisten and glisten ever so slightly. I expected that her tongue might even escape her mouth as her eyes keenly study what lie before them. She turns her eyes back toward me with a tinge of excitement in them.

"I am unfamiliar with this school of- Laven. Perhaps you remembered-?"

"No," I grumbled. "Not a memory. Just a feeling. A powerful feeling but just a feeling all the same. I got one whiff and look at this kitchen, and something tried to reach out to something else... Except there was nothing there to reach."

A black fuzzy paw came to rest on my shoulder. It firmly and confidently grabs hold as it tries to reassure me.

"Nevertheless," Susan warmly says. "It is still feasible to reach out. There may yet be something to discover. If only from 'feelings'... But it is late. Although we need not now concern ourselves with the dilemma of tonight's feast, I suggest we do not hesitate for long." She lets go of my shoulder and walks toward the entrance while her voice becomes burdened by exasperation. "I had to exert a great deal of effort to keep that beastly woman from this place before you were finished. I am not confident I could do so for much longer. Come now. I spied you earlier, and while you were unresponsive, I had the foresight to prepare a table."

While I watched Susan's back and happily swishing tail disappear through the door and down the hallway I found myself slightly uplifted. I suppose we'd have a proper dinner for once. Some carbohydrates and greens instead of the strict protein diet of wild game. With a slight smile on my face, I gathered all the plates on a trolley and made my way in the direction that Susan had strolled away, deeper into the servant's house.

When I caught up with the anubis, she was standing and

presiding over a small square table with five chairs. Placemats with cutlery, glasses and wine from the cellar were spread out in a precise and perfectly uniform manner. Susan gracefully waved her paw to the table. She invited me to leave the trolley behind and take my seat. Before I could make a move though, something barreled into the room behind me.

Someone who obnoxiously sniffed the air in tandem to the crackle of seething flame. Blissful hums and singsong chipper tunes escaped her lips while a profound blush spread across her cheeks.

Rose gasped with delight as a trail of drool escaped the corner of her mouth, “What is THIS?”

She was beaming with delight as she held her claws together and leaned over the trolley of food. Her thick, red and armored tail swished behind her, and embers were spit and thrown in all directions from her tail's ridge of flame. Luckily, each ember harmlessly came to rest on the ground, furniture and walls. They snuffed themselves out and faded from existence on their own instead of lighting the whole room on fire. I don't think Susan had called for her. More likely, as soon as the food left the confines of the kitchen she had smelled it and came running from wherever she was in the villa.

Susan puffs her chest out with pride, “Tonight's meal is provided by none other than our own precious Laven, and- Hey!”

Rose's hand, maybe unconsciously maybe not, was reaching out to start feasting right then and there and only stopped when Susan's paw slapped it away. The sound of it alone hurt, and Rose pulls back her claw with a yelp. She turns toward Susan with an indignant expression of protest on her face, which then softens as what Susan had said finally sinks into her thick skull.

“He did?” She then turns toward me and asks again. “You did?”

I nod. Rose beams an ear-fin to ear-fin smile and throws her weight into me at full force. The only reason I'm not bowled onto the floor is because her arms, and whole body, wrap around me and hold me up. She stands on the tips of her talons and rubs her cheek against mine making blissful and cute noises while she does so. I quickly feel the heat rush from her body into mine as I feel her excitement and happiness boil over and into me as something more tangible.

While Susan is forced to watch helplessly, the other two girls meander into the room at the same time. Minte's usual deadpan expression softens for a mere moment. Her mouth goes slightly agape while her eyes widen in surprise. A long 'ooooh' escapes from her lips as she is obviously impressed by the spread of food prepared before her. Chris—who finally emerged from her hiding hole at last—casts her eyes around as well. They do exactly the same as she nearly does a

double take... Except the lower half of her face is still covered by that white scarf, and only muffled sounds of whatever words or sounds she makes can be heard.

"Yes yes," Susan says, clapping her paws together to get everyone's attention. "The meal will not remain warm into posterity, very much unlike particular hot heads... Be seated so that we shall begin."

Once more she waves her paw toward the two chairs sharing the same side of the table facing toward us. One of them already decorated with the wine and glass she had been using previously on the back porch.

"Right this way, Laven-"

"Hey!" Rose shouts out as she finally separates from me.

I take a huge gasping breath after being nearly crushed and suffocated for almost half a minute.

"What do you think you are doing?" Her expression is dire and accusatory as she thrusts an extended index talon at Susan.

"Please take your seat elsewhere, Rose."

"You can't tell me what to do... You picked a small table on purpose didn't you!"

"Rose... Please cease being so childish for one moment so that we might-"

"Don't try and talk down to me like that now. This is all a set up!"

"Yes. I set the tables and have already taken my seat. Now kindly take yours and-"

Without another word, Rose bounds forward and reaches out for the back of Susan's chair. The anubis is not dissuaded by the salamander on a warpath and, since she was already there, has more than enough time to firmly grip the chair's back as well. They each pull the poor wooden chair toward themselves as it creaks under the pressure of being pulled in two opposite directions. Realizing the chair will break if they use any more strength, the chair hovers between them at a stalemate. Their eyes turn from the chair and to each other.

"Dirty tricks!" Rose growls in protest.

"Let... go and be... seated." Susan snarls back while struggling against Rose's superior strength, the previous calmly diplomatic and paternally chastising tone in her voice now all but gone.

Their foreheads collide and grind against one another as sparks collide in the midst of their death glares at one another. Meanwhile, Minte and Chris circle around with whatever plates and bowls they can manage to carry and place on the table and take the seats adjacent. That leaves only the spot on the opposite side of the table. They remain silent and try their best to blend into the

background as the battle rages on.

"I have already claimed this seat, you oaf." Susan growls with her canine teeth now flaring.

"You can move em," Rose hisses back.

"I set the table. Therefore, I get to be seated where I desire." Susan childishly snaps back.

"You never told me you were setting any table. You said you spotted a feisty looking ice golem in the hills looking for a fight... There was no such thing!"

"There was so; you just laggard the climb up the mountain!"

Ooooh~... So that's how she dealt with Rose for so long. Anyways, I can't let this continue on forever. I sigh in resignation and walk around to the other side of the table to take the uncontested seat for myself.

"Ah!" Rose and Susan grunt at the same time as they both look in my direction.

I glare back at them with the best 'I'm very disappointed' expression I can muster. Their furious and then surprised expressions turn into dejected and ashamed frowns before they flare back up into anger when their eyes meet again. Thankfully they keep the peace enough to leave it at that as they take the seats next to one another. Neither breaks their death stare as they slowly pull the two chairs out seat themselves.

"Laven... Laven." A faint voice calls out to my left.

I look over toward Minte; it was a rare event to hear her speak at all. Then I hear the sound of something much less uncommon. A snick as one of her arm blades snaps into place. It flies in my direction and secures into place only ten centimeters from my face. I nearly fall backward out of my chair when I flinch in a panic... But stuck on the tip of her long green chitinous blade is a large hunk of meat. It was cut from the rest of the fillet in an impressive perfect square.

"Aaaaaah." She says in nearly a whisper with her jaw hanging low.

I reach up with my fork to take it, but she pulls it away. When I lower my fork, she moves her blade back into place. She lets out another noise like before while I fidget and stare at the odd girl for a few seconds more. Finally, I get an idea what she's after. I lean over and take the meat off the tip of her blade with my teeth. It's a little too big for me to even start chewing, but I still try all the same. With my cheeks nearly fully puffed out, I begin trying to chew. I struggle, and surely fail, to give her a genuine nod of thanks. She buys it with a faint smile on her lips. Minte's face even beams, just a bit, then she focuses on her own meal.

While I struggle to chew on what amounts to a very flavorful

sock in my mouth, I turn an eye to the now silent Chris. I'm surprised to see that she is actually staring right at me, but as soon as our eyes meet, hers dart away. Chris hasn't even removed the scarf; she just pulled it up far enough so that it wouldn't block her mouth. It's still wrapped around her nose and cheeks like an impressively failed bandanna.

With her three talons at the end of her wing's forearms, she skewers the meat filled dough balls and pops them into her mouth. Her eyes rolled away from me and look in the opposite direction. Every so often she looks back into my eyes but just as suddenly looks away again. She seems more and more agitated each time she does this. I don't know why she doesn't just stop. Eventually she begins to start missing the food that she has been is plucking from the center of the table entirely. She's not even looking at what she's doing anymore in a desperate attempt to avoid eye contact altogether. I give up and look elsewhere before she breaks something. There's something squirrelly up with this girl. When I get the chance, I'm going to get to the bottom of it.

"Yipe!" a pained cry escapes from Susan as she nearly leaps from her chair. "Cease stomping your heel talon on my paw at once!"

"Not my fault," Rose says sardonically. "I didn't set the table with no room to- oomph!" She is cut off suddenly when Susan's elbow collides with side.

The dinner was good; the company was pleasant, but the manners were severely lacking. But as far as dinner goes with these girls... this was by far dominating the positive highlight reel. Sad as it is I have to think that.

When the meal was done, and every last morsel was gone, I was forbidden from helping put everything away. I suppose they felt guilty that I had gone and done so much on my own. There was going to be no complaining from me though. I'm tired. Dead tired. I just want to collapse on a bed right now and not arrange a morning wake up call. So that's just what I did. While the girls were busy, I made my way back to the villa. I explored the second story of the main villa where all the bedrooms and bathrooms—more like chamber pot rooms—were arranged. I was far too tired to bathe, and I had already shed my layers of muck in the lake, so I staked claim to the best bed I could find.

Mattresses and pillows filled with down instead of straw. Supportive and finely crafted wooden frames. Sheets and covers made with the finest fibers. If it just had springs, I could swear it was like any other bed back home. All I have to do is just shed my clothes and... A rustle and clatter near the door pulls me from my fantasy. It appears I'm not going to rest as easily as I had hoped.

When I turn toward the door frame, I spy Rose and Susan grinding together, shoulder to shoulder, while they both try getting in through the door at the same time. They bicker and argue quietly among themselves with hushed voices until they finally notice I'm looking right at them.

“Not tonight,” I say shaking my head.

“You heard him,” Rose tells the anubis beside her, turning her head with a grin. “You can beat it for tonight.”

“What did you just-” Susan growls back.

“All of you,” my voice comes out sternly. “I'm dead tired. I need at least ONE good night's sleep.” I emphasize with one rigidly raised index finger.

This kind of thing had been happening for weeks. The bedrolls would be laid out around the campfire, but they'd always at some point pile on me. It was like a scene straight from The Three Stooges. Everyone tried to get in at the same time, so no one got anywhere. But all the same, I would wake up, sometimes several times a night, with all of them crowded around me. They were always laying partially on top of me, beside me or some part of me was resting on any part of them. I needed a break from that tonight.

It seems the tone in my voice was enough though. It pained to see the look on their faces because I'm too much of a kind hearted wimp for my own good, but they did relent and dejectedly scurry away with their tails hanging low. But I still had to go over to the curtains by the window and pull them open. Hidden behind them was the green assassin. She kept still with an emotionless face; pretending as if I hadn't actually seen her because she hadn't even flinched yet, let alone blink. I look down and speak directly to her. Frankly, with the same tone in my voice I used when I spoke to the other two.

“I said, 'all of you'.”

Because it's now painfully obvious her hiding had failed, she leaves just as dejected as the other two. She opens the window up and then slips back out, practically slithering along the walls the whole way. When the window clicks shut I close the curtains, lock the window and walk over to the bed. I'm too tired to even shed my clothes now. I just crawl over the fluffy sheets and lay my back on top of them. Now... I just hope I can-

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I open my eyes. The oaken ceiling I remember residing above me just a moment ago is gone. A floating sensation has replaced the sinking feeling of falling deeper into the bed I had just been laying in. The light from the stars and moon are nowhere to be seen. I can't even spy a glimmer of candlelight. Panic almost grips me right away, but I feel as though this inky darkness is familiar to me. It's not from a lack

of light; I can see my hand the rest of my body with ease. Turns out I had nothing to worry about when the darkness gives way to a world of billowing gray mist. My feet gently find the ground without me hitting it at terminal velocity. I'm sure I've seen a scene like this before, but I cannot put my finger on it.

The swirling gray mists eventually turn from a gaseous form into quivering walls of liquid before becoming solid. They form into a rather spacious room. I spy refrigerators, ovens, stoves, pots, pans and an arsenal of cooking utensils. In the distance where the whole world seems to waver and transition back into liquid and mist, silhouettes of people form. They make noise, and what they speak I cannot make out exactly. Who I can make out clearly are two people taking form before my very eyes. While the rest of the world retains a bleak gray color, these two people, one a child and another a rather large beer gutted man, take form.

“Well, kid. I know it ain't no vacation, but we can still make the best of it. I promised your old man I'd watch you for the summer, but I still gotta work too.”

The man speaks before he has fully formed. I can pick out an accent in his voice before I can even see his face. At last the man's gaseous and liquid form solidifies and becomes rich with vivid color which spills out from him and colors the area around him as well. I'm tall enough to spot the bald spot on the top of his head as I stand beside him, but he still towers over the child standing before him. He has a large girth to him with greasy, slightly tanned skin. The hair from his head seemed to have emigrated to the rest of his body, and it contrasts with the white clothes he wears. The more they take shape, the more I realize it to be a classic chef's uniform. In his fat round head, a pair of brown eyes look down kindly upon the boy.

I recognize the boy immediately. That boy is... me. His eyes look dejected, and they refuse to look the round middle aged man in the eye. He looks depressed; a boy that couldn't be any older than twelve. The boy's sour temper doesn't stop the man though. He kneels down so that he can look at the kid at his eye level.

“I think I know what the boss is after. And believe me, we can make it a summer worthwhile. What do ya say?”

The kid doesn't flinch or say anything back. The man just takes a spare chef's hat and throws it on top of the kid's head, but he refuses to leave it at just that.

“One day the old man is gonna wanna retire. Pretty sure he's just leaving it all 'ta you. The land and places he owns. If that's how it's gonna be, then you better know how it's done, right?”

The boy still doesn't react.

“I wouldn't work for the man if I didn't respect what he can

do. I'd still be a stubborn fucking mule back in Messina cooking meals no further than two kilometers where mia madre popped me out. Now I'm head chef for one of the Big Apple's top ten restaurants! That's what I like about the man. Takes risks. Trusts people. Would rather start up a new place than buy a yacht or something... Really, I'm surprised he didn't just stick you in a boarding school or something instead."

"...Says kids who go to schools like that don't learn about the real world," The boy finally speaks.

The man's face turns into a huge smile after getting the kid to show he's alive, "Damn right! That sounds like him... Known him for twenty years now; he's a friend of mine, so stop worrying yourself..." He looks left and right then puts both his hairy hands on the boy's shoulders. "I got a daughter about your age too. We'll all get together when I'm off on weekend."

A voice from the shades in the distance calls out, "Stop pimping your girl out Vinnie."

A chorus of laughter erupts from the four corners of the kitchen while another shouts out, "Get your retirement plan sorted out somewhere other than work, boss."

'Vinnie' seems to have a rather good nature, I deduce, considering what was just said to him. He just smiles before faking an angry face as he removes his hands from the boy's shoulders, stands up and shouts back at the other chefs.

"If ya got time to talk shit, you had better be using to get those bases ready before dinner rush!"

The shades of the other chefs share another laugh and go back to work. Vinnie turns back to the boy with a smile still on his face.

"She's a sweet thing... And one day she's gonna be on magazines. Just you all watch and see!" He says while shouting the last bit to all the other chefs.

But there's a little sadness that gets through his fake smile when he turns back to the boy.

"Not many friends though... So, if you can count on me ta show you the ropes and a bit of uncle Vinnie's prize wisdom, ya'll be nice. Deal?"

"Yeah. As soon as they let her out of juvie that is," One errant chef jokes back.

Vinnie back stiffens, and his face twists just hearing those words. His hand instinctively reaches for a nearby butcher's cleaver. His expression is menacing as he turns his back away from the boy and toward the mocking voices.

"That's my step daughter, Jennie, from a short lived second marriage... And I'll say this just once. If I hear one of you fucking punks

shit talk my little Angela again... I'll chop your cock off and feed it to ya!"

With a thunderous thud, he slams the cleaver deep into a wooden chopping board. The banter and din of the kitchen dies immediately. Even I jump, and I'm as good as a ghost in this place.

"Filet migdong! Capisce!?"

No one says a word. Every chef in the kitchen stands still and is petrified. I cannot see their faces; I don't know if they are scared or just going through the usual motions, but they eventually get back to work. This time without the banter. 'Uncle' Vinnie turns back to the boy with another smile on his face as though that all didn't just happen. It doesn't really need to be said, but the boy looks as though he pissed himself.

"First piece of advice," Vinnie says, his voice trying to play it comically. "No matter how depressed and messed up you are after your first divorce, and no matter how fine you think a girl looks when she's young and already has a kid; you figure out if she's only just six months out of rehab."

Vinnie turns away and while gathering some ingredients. He doesn't bother with the knife and leaves it where it is. Perhaps as a warning to all the other chefs who may think it is safe to joke around about what the man holds very dear to him. Perhaps the only thing he does care about aside from his job.

He mutters once more under his breath, "Fucking social services. Bunch of fucking bureaucratic shit heads."

Even though there's no one else to see it, my head leans back on its own. As though the weight of what he just said hit my full force in the face. I think Vinnie has had a hard life.

Slowly, the kitchen begins to disintegrate, and the solid parts of it turn back into liquid then a gas. The mists swirl, and the scene changes. Trees, paved paths, small man-made lakes appear one by one. The draw distance of the scene reaches far and wide and only just ends at the massive buildings towering in the distance at every direction I look. Dozens... Hundreds of near formless shades meander through the gray park, but there is one spot of color that stands out like a sore thumb. Three people are walking together in the shade of all the trees. They color the immediate area they stroll through, even if that color does vanish after they pass by.

They are quite far away, and I have to pass through the infinite misty crowds of shades to reach them. I dare to even walk on the surface of one lake to catch up with them. It's a thrilling experience to be sure, and it even feels more real and vivid than any old dream. When I reach the other shore, I spot Vinnie walking hand in hand with a little girl on his left and with the boy, a younger me, walking on his

right. The boy still looks rather dejected; he doesn't even take hold of the man's greasy and sweaty hand. The girl had to be Angela. Her expression was difficult to judge, partly because it was mostly hidden behind a hoodie. The whole scene could've otherwise looked like some sort of sweet, yet twisted, family image if you changed just a few things.

They stop at a booth selling ice cream cones before they come to rest at a park bench. Except for Vinnie's loud mouth, no one speaks at all, and it's all rather awkward. That doesn't stop the fat chef wearing a track suit from smiling ear to ear. His face only twists into something other than a smile when an antiquated cell phone rings in his pants pocket. Vinnie answers it foully, but quiet enough for the children to not hear. He fawns over his daughter and stays within sight to make the call. A joke is made about calling on the boy's manhood to look out for her before he strays far enough away from earshot, and the two children sit on the bench by themselves.

The boy hasn't changed at all, save the lack of a hairnet and other sanitary clothing. Just a pair of simple beige cargo shorts, a white t-shirt and running shoes. The girl seated next to him though, I wasn't sure what to expect from Vinnie's ranting, but I have to confess he wasn't too far off. She couldn't be any older than ten and looked rather girly with a purple hoodie, white tights, red short skirt and little brown dance shoes. Her hood was pulled over her head, but a long and thick platinum blonde braid was draped over her shoulder and hanging down past her waist through the neck of the hoodie as she sat there.

When I looked at Vinnie, I had a hard time seeing the relation between father and daughter, but when I got a look at her face, the brown eyes gave it away. Everything else about her departed from her father though. She was small, and she was skinny. Her father might even be right about the magazine bit. With how her face is built now, she might just—she may have already grown up into a beautiful woman. Except there was a peculiar thing about that face of hers. She had a certain aura about her. I could see it from looking at her, and I could feel it from the boy who sat uncomfortably beside her.

Some peculiar characters were also on that purple hoodie. They looked like cartoon characters. Young girls, princesses of all types. Except that for the part where they were frilly and gaily dressed, yet seemed more prepared for battle than the ball. I think it might just say something about the girl herself, but I think I'd soon find that out the moment she started talking.

“Say...” Angela says, her voice sounding bored and monotonous but loud and crystal clear, “What's a marriage?”

I didn't have to do anything; the boy did it all for me. The

question out of left field caused him to cough and spray his ice cream cone all over the pavement. The girl's eyes do not for a single second let up on the boy. Her big brown eyes pried at him with a fierce curiosity.

"What?" The boy rightfully asks.

"What's a marriage? Why do grownups have them?"

Vinnie's subtlety left something to be desired. Did he have a halfway talk with his daughter, and she took it a little too literally? The boy struggles to answer. We're the same person separated by only years, and even I'm not sure I could weather those eyes.

"They do it because they love each other," He answers with the safest choice.

Her next question comes without so much as a pause, "Do we love each other?"

Another harsh curve ball.

"What? No- I mean, I don't know. We met like thirty minutes ago."

"Hmm." She hums while finally breaking her deathly and curious gaze.

I see the boy holding his hand over his chest trying to get his heart beat back in order. Then I can see it in his eyes. 'If she's gonna come back, I need to change the topic to something I can keep up with'.

"I like your braid." He says.

"My mommy doesn't like it. Says it's too kiddy... Daddy likes it though. Mommy says Daddy spoils me too much. But I like Daddy more than Mark. Mark only likes Sara. Mommy likes her too. Sara doesn't like to play though. She's pretty mean. Doesn't like talking to me."

She was so quiet before, but now a torrent of words pours from her mouth. The boy is overwhelmed and tries desperately to get a word in edgewise to have her stop.

"You are a kid though," The boy says.

"Yeah." She says, her train of thought performing a perfect hairpin turn as it keeps going. "Does that mean we can't get married?"

"Why would you wanna do that?" The boy deftly tosses the question back like a hot potato.

"Daddy says you gotta if you wanna be happy. But you gotta do it right... Or you end up like 'mommy'... I don't like Mark."

"Is Mark your new daddy?"

"No. Daddy is Daddy. Mark is Mark."

For the first time, her face showed a human expression. She looked at the boy as if he had asked the stupidest question she had ever heard. The boy had been looking at the girl as though she were

some kind of alien all this time, now replacing that confusion and unease was a little anger.

"Marriage is when two people become mommy and daddy. That's what marriage is," He answers sternly.

"So you do what mommies and daddies do?"

"Y-yes."

"Hmm." She hums again, a sound she seems to make whenever she goes deep into thought.

Angela finally goes silent. The boy breathes a sigh of relief. But when he dares to take another look at the girl, Angela's open palm comes flying in at full force. It connects with the boy's face and catches him completely off guard. It takes me off guard. There's a resounding slap that carries far and wide. Even Vinnie hears it, and it tears him away from his phone call. The boy falls off the bench and hits the pavement. He doesn't hit it hard, nor does he look hurt. His wide eyed expression looks surprised more than anything. We both look at Angela at the same time with the same expression on our face. We are both treated to the girl's genuine pretty little smile. There isn't the slightest trace of malice in it.

The boy is still confused when Vinnie rushes over to make sure the two kids are alright. His spoiling nature comes through in that he doesn't get mad or even lecture the girl. At the same time, he doesn't defend her. He desperately tries to get the boy to tell him if he's hurt or okay. The look of bewilderment on the boy's face is understandable. But I look at the girl, and now I see something profoundly tragic in her outburst. I dare not say it was even violent. Just terribly, terribly misinformed. The weight of that little moment hits my heart hard.

I ended up staring at the scene and forgot about the surroundings. The park and buildings in the distance were slowly melting away back into mist. Even Vinnie himself dissolved, but the two kids remained there in a world of nothing else but gray mist. They were both frozen in place, the girl with a blushing smile and the boy looking up at her with a profoundly confused expression.

The sound of an ear piercingly loud honking horn fast approaching from all directions ripped through the silence.

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My back lifts off my bed, and a scream almost escapes my lips. I feel drenched, covered in a cold sweat. A pounding is out of control in my chest, and my breathing is heavy and rapid. I sit upright on the bed and panicked about nothing at all. I wipe my hand over my forehead and remove a layer of slimy wetness. It feels as though only a second had passed since I had suddenly drifted off to sleep. However, when I look at the candle next to my bed, it has long since melted to its brass holder and snuffed itself out. The room was completely dark, and I was

alone.

Only the light from the moon and stars, shining without a cloud in the sky, allowed me to see anything at all. I laid back down to try going back to sleep, but every time I closed my eyes, they shot back open. I was now wide awake. I swore under my breath and flung my legs off the side of the bed and sat there.

With my head held in my hands, I tried to calm my still beating heart and out of control breaths. Something spooked me, but I didn't know what. I had just been in a dreamless sleep, so I didn't know what the hell was going on. It only frustrated me and made it impossible for me to focus and calm myself down.

When I held my breath to stop myself from panting, I heard a voice in the distance. A very soft, gentle and singing voice. I could not make out what it was saying, but there was no ignoring that it was there. Once I acknowledged it, it couldn't be unheard.

There was no way I was going back to sleep even though it was the middle of the night, so I dragged myself off my bed, slipped through the door and followed the voice coming far down the hall.

Chapter 69

It's only in times like this, in the middle of the night and without a light at hand, that you truly begin to appreciate what you had. I missed having the power to flip a switch and not having to worry about walking into something. But such was life in this place. A time about half a millennium behind what I am used to. I've been reduced to feel my way down the darkness of this pitch black hallway. I found myself sympathizing with a blind man cruelly robbed of his walking cane.

Rose's fiery tail and Susan's magics made me forget just how precious a little thing like light truly is. Without either of them I'd just bumble in the darkness. Much like what I am doing now. But if I did knock something over or trip, I was certain one of them would come running. I wasn't about to make putting my foot down earlier come to nothing. Why? Because I can feel it in my bones that it won't work again. Not twice in a row. Yet I couldn't contain my morbid curiosity, so I moved onward with unrestrained caution.

At least the floorboards never creaked. For the first time, I found myself thanking the excessive care that went into building this place. My bare feet were also cushioned by the velvet red carpet. Summer was near but still a few weeks away, so the night time air was chilly. It was tepid even in my jeans and green t-shirt which was still soaked with my cold sweat. However, I hardly felt a thing. The tingle of the cold, the unpleasantness of the caked and drying sweat and the clear and present danger of being ambushed by any of the girls at any moment were nothing right now. I only desired to know what this sound was. It was hypnotizing.

It would have been better had I stayed in my room, but I felt restless, and this song was compelling me onward. A siren's call from somewhere in the villa. It was faint, but there was hardly another sound for it to compete with. There was no wind or rain battering the sides of the villa. No snoring or restless tossing and turning. I could swear that I was feeling the sweet sound instead of hearing it. Sometimes I heard the sing song of a beautiful voice, and then it would turn into a sweet melodic hum. There was something oddly nostalgic about it. Maybe my mind was still scattered after just waking up?... I should know what I was approaching, but there was a haze clouding my thoughts.

The melody reached its loudest before I knew it. I had reached my final destination. A bedroom door slightly ajar, the sweet sounds escaping from the other side. My compulsion forced my hand, and I gently pushed my way in before I thought to knock. It swung open without a sound, and laid before me was a bedroom like my own. A large curtained bed remained undisturbed; its occupant elsewhere.

Directly in front of me was an open window which let the starlight and moon beam sweep across the floor. One solitary shadow existed within that beam of light as it stood facing the night. My eyes followed the long shadow, and there I saw the unmistakable form of Chris.

Her head was tilted back so that her eyes could look up at the night sky. It was a sky filled with countless alien stars. White cloth hung around her neck and shoulders and draped down her back. Moonlight shone through the fabric and created the illusion of a bluish halo about her. Her wings were folded pensively in front of her. The moonlight likewise shined ever so slightly through the leather of her wings, and I almost thought for a moment they were the pure white and feathery wings of an angel.

From her throat, a saccharine vibration filled the room; the source of the mysterious sound. The usual husky, heroic and manly tone and pitch in her voice had softened to something almost completely unrecognizable. My initial impression of an angel rebounded. It was only then my half awake mind finally remembered that I had heard this voice before.

Aldergywen shines, near glimmer of gemstone
The pauper braves the jaws of Gaudric's Boar
Two mortals who had met elsewhere before
The fates themselves are brought low to atone

All the gods so moved that they do condone
Two loves never to be lost evermore
Dove and hawk, take wing and form the shore
From stars an eternal bond has grown

Her voice wavered and paused every so often. She was composing the song ad lib. One thing was for certain though; it was sung in the kind of voice that wins reality TV shows. She sang each line back to herself and then hummed its melody once again. Her throat cleared every so often, and she changed the inflection ever so slightly while she searched to perfect whatever it was that she was singing to herself. There was a peculiar power in her voice and her words. I hadn't the slightest clue what she was singing about, but it invoked a calm nostalgic feeling that left a warm afterglow in my chest.

I took another step forward and foolishly let the door hinges creak. The sound carried inside the room unopposed. Chris's spine went rigid, her whole body tensed up and she shivered comically. Her head turned around slowly as though the joints in her neck were rusty. She only had to meet my gaze with one eye before she quickly looked back out the window. I couldn't get a good look at the expression on her face as she let slip a short squeak. Her forearm talons reached for the scarf around her neck, and she clumsily pulled it back over her

mouth and nose.

I took another step forward and called out to her, “What's wrong?”

Chris's muffled voice responded, but she spoke out the window, “Um, everything is fine. No problems here, Master.”

Her voice had returned to the gruff and faux masculine tone I am more familiar with.

I took yet another step forward, “Chris?”

“Uh, just having a bit of trouble sleeping, but everything is... yeah. Just getting some fresh air. I'm fine, really. Thank you... H-how are you?”

Everything was obviously not fine. Chris has a habit of running her mouth whenever she's nervous. And when she does, most of what comes out of it is nonsense. I'm not exactly sure why she does it. My best guess is that she is trying to psyche herself out. She was trying to distract herself, and me, from something. But I wasn't about to be caught up in her verbal slight of hand. Not this time. I'm on a mission this time.

So I didn't let up and repeated myself, “Chris.”

She looked left and right in a panic as I approached. With her long wing, she reached over and clipped the side of a vase on a shelf next to her. It toppled over; the flowers inside plopped against the surface while the water in the vase splashed against the floor between us.

“Careful, Master. Got a spill here. Just give me a few minutes to clean that up. Very slippery. Very dangerous.”

While she was fumbling and bumbling I got within arms reach behind her. I stepped without a care across the puddle. Chris's reaction to hearing my bare footsteps through the water was to throw herself into one final act of desperation. She got one talon up on the window sill and grabbed hold of the frame with her talons in preparation to launch herself outside.

“I'd h-hate to bore you further, M-master! I'll just-”

“Chris,” I said sternly.

She stopped in her tracks. Her head turned partially around, and through her mask I could see her jaw flap open to say something else, but I stopped her.

“Stop-”

I loathed to do this, but I had no choice. I couldn't let this go on any longer.

“-That's an order.”

“Eep!” Was the only response, another small rodent like squeak, but this time in affirmation.

The wyvern stood at attention like a soldier. She turned around

slowly, methodically and stared forward with her chin level to the floor. Since she's a full head taller than me, I had to crane my neck up just to look at her. Her desperation didn't end there though. Chris's chest puffed out, and the mask moved as she flapped her jaws once again. This time it was just incohesive blabbering. I raised my hand and waved her to stop.

"And while we're at it, stop with the mask business. Please. I can hardly understand what you're saying."

The wyvern froze mid speech. Her knees buckled ever so slightly. Now she looked more like a school girl than a soldier; the speed of the change left me baffled.

Despite her hesitation, a sense of duty stronger than her emotional turmoil seized her. Her talons reached up halfway then stopped. I tilted my head down and stared up at her through my eyebrows. It was the best impatient get on with it I could muster. She continued.

Her clumsy talons wrapped around the mask at her cheeks, and she slowly pulled it back down so that the scarf hung around her neck and shoulders. I immediately saw what the reason was. Chris's face is bright red from ear-fin to ear-fin. She can't even look straight ahead, let alone look down at me. What I thought were tears welled up in her golden eyes.

The longer I stared the redder she got. Her self-consciousness fueled a positive feedback loop, and it just got worse. After only a few seconds I had to spare both of us and looked away. My impatience had been deflated almost instantly, and I was left scrambling to regain my own composure. I think my own cheeks were starting to flush just from watching her.

I softened my voice, "Chris-"

"N-no!" She yelled, throwing up her wings to block me from approaching any closer. "I'm not well."

I had my doubts.

"I could be contagious!" She said, half joking, as she waved her wings around in front of her.

I ignored her protests and slipped my hand past her guard. I had to stretch in order to do so, but I placed my right palm against her forehead and my left on my own... There didn't appear to be anything wron- Oooooh, there it is.

Chris's entire head had flushed red by the time I looked back up. My hand felt as though I had put it on a hot stove. I think there were even pillars of steam billowing out from her ears. She leaped back and almost flew out the window; only stopping when she threw her wings out and plastered herself against the entire wall. I looked down at my hands and flexed my fingers. There was a residual feeling

of heat in the palm of my hand. When I looked back at Chris, she finally made eye contact with me. Her expression showed more terror than anything else.

There was no mistaking it. That was no fever.

"Chris, you're not sick."

"But I am!" She protested.

"No you- Alright.... Let's assume you are. Why didn't you just go talk with Susan?"

Shoshanah's magics had healed her wing to just as good as before. If Chris was feeling ill, there was no reason to not consult with her and-

Chris shook her head, "No no no. Whenever I got close to asking... Something hurt."

Okay. Odd. But I continued to grill her.

"Then Rose. I haven't gotten sick once since she begun clinging to me non-stop ever since we met. If it's a bug or something, then I'm sure if you just let her-"

Chris shook her head again, "No no no. Something hurts whenever I'm about to talk to either."

Now she was being a plain old contrarian.

"What do you mean, 'it hurts'?" I asked, getting a little impatient.

Chris's wings folded back, and she rested her forearm talons against her chest. She squished her massive bust aside slightly, and her talons clung to her heart.

"Here." She said, wistfully.

Her eyes slowly shut, and she stood there with a sad smile on her face. She looked perfectly serene and very much unlike she had been for the past couple of minutes.

"Whenever I stray too far, my chest hurts. But when I come too close... Close to you... I feel unease, but warm... Too warm..."

She was muttering, and her voice trailed off at the end, but I heard her well enough. I gulped down hard and gathered my wits about me.

"A-alright. I concede. That does sound like a sickness..."

Chris' eyes shot wide open as her head perked up. I immediately regretted what I just said.

"Really?" Her voice broke a little as she cried out. "If you know what it is, please tell me.... Master!"

She forgot herself for a moment then pleaded while she rushed toward me. The over two meters tall girl nearly bowled me over. Her claws scratched grooves in the hardwood floor before she came to a stop just in front of me. Even then her weight was pressing up against me as her foretalons grasped me around my shoulders. The best they

were able to that is. Her strength was irresistible. Then she begun to shake me back and forth while my head banged forward and back like a bobble head doll.

If she kept this up I might get whiplash.

"Calm. Down. Chris," I tried to say, but I had to be careful not to bite my tongue.

My chin might otherwise hit the airbags currently deployed just under of my line of sight.

Finally, she came back to her senses when she noticed my distress. I had to wait a few seconds before continuing. My brain was still knocking around inside my skull, and there were spots in my vision.

I wasn't prepared for that experience again, so I just said it candidly, "That sound an awful lot like... well... like love sickness."

I couldn't say it with a straight face. My eyes averted hers on their own. My cheeks blushed red just from saying the painfully embarrassing truth. Chris was still looking down at me with half crazed and expecting eyes. Her face was frozen stock still with blank eyes and a creepy, ever so slight, smile. Without a word, she unclenched her talons from my shoulders, turned around and then walked over to the bed.

When she approached the nearest post of the curtained bed, she slammed her forehead into the finely carved hardwood. A loud crack echoed in the room. She didn't stop there. She banged her head against the post a few more times, each one with a crack no quieter than the last.

"Chris, stop it!... You're going to wake up the whole villa!"

I felt a bit bad for not having her stop on account that slamming her head like that had to hurt. But I'd watched arrows fired from close range deflect harmlessly off her exposed human skin for crying out loud!

When I told her to stop, she complied. But it was a bit too late for the bed. The wooden post had been splintered, shattered and completely obliterated. A pair of vicious scaled horns and a skull made of something tougher than steel made sure of that. One-quarter of the curtain sagged onto the bed itself since the number of posts suspending it had been reduced by one rather convincingly. Her strength appeared to leave her as she slumped to the floor. Chris's wings spread eagle across the floor beside her as she fell on her sprawled legs. Her thick and long muscular tail plopped motionless on the floor like a rolled up rag.

Now I felt as though I had done something terrible. It was just the best conjecture I had!... I cradled my face in my hand and tried to think what I had to do next.

“Well... That's what that song you were singing earlier was about... Wasn't it?”

Chris's eyes slowly turned my way. I could have gone without seeing them. The creepy factor had gone up by a few margins. There was almost a tangible aura of negativity forming a halo around her head, and a black miasma radiated off her whole body. The angelic impression she had given me before had been all but obliterated.

“You heard that?” She asked; her voice sounded devoid of all life.

I scrambled to pick up my fumble. That was obviously the wrong thing to have said.

“N-no- well- yes- I won't lie- but only about two stanzas.”

Tears welled up in her eyes and caused me to stop.

“That's as far as I've gotten,” She said, her voice flimsy.

Panic mode.

“It's good... So far. I mean you really sell it. N-not that it needs to be sold. It's good on its own merits. Just that your singing is great too. Really!”

I waved my arms around helplessly. Just like a certain idiot was earlier... Maybe as a distraction?

“I just think the meaning is just lost on me. Ha ha ha,” I disparaged myself and laughed awkwardly

Anything to deflect something.

Chris's eyes finally peel themselves away and look back down at the floor. I was not sure if that was a victory for me, but I deflated none the less, and my shoulders slumped. I heard Chris take a deep breath and then push herself off the floor. She let loose a little grunt of effort and straightened her back while throwing her elbows backward at her hips.

I only caught a glimpse of her face for a moment, but it looked as though she had recovered from her depression just as easily as she sunk into it. She strode toward the window and looked out into the night. Her neck craned upward to where she had been watching the night sky before. I was left to wonder what she was up to.

I stopped her from escaping through the window before, but now I felt I had to let her do whatever she was about to do. Chris leaned out the window so she could look straight up into the night sky. She then pulled her head back in and clicked her tongue in disappointment.

I realized a little too late when she began to squeeze out the window and climb up the side of the villa. I lunged forward pointlessly, too far away to stop her to begin with. She only vanished for a moment though. A few second later, dangling enticingly in front of the window was her tail.

“Come on, master.” She said with gusto.

Against my better judgment, I approached the window and reluctantly grabbed hold of the tail. I was suddenly ripped free from the house and nearly crushed my knees against the windowsill as I flew outside. Like a fish caught on a hook and trolled toward the fisherman, I was whisked into the air only to be brought upward. I found myself next to Chris who clung to the roof of the villa like a gargoyle. The furthest she could stretch her tail was just high enough for me to let go and grab hold of the roof's gutter.

I flailed. Panicked. But I successfully pulled myself onto the roof. My heart was racing, my arms hurt and my breath was hoarse. Looming over me, balanced on her wings and knees, was Chris who looked down at me with a thousand watt smile.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked incredulously.

My tone didn't appear to affect Chris's normal chipper attitude, “I'm showing you something.”

With a smile like that, I had to let her go.

“And that would be?”

“Look up!”

Chris pulled back out of my vision, and replacing her smiling face were stars stretching as far as my eyes could see. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the heavens spanned from one horizon to the other. I couldn't recall the last time I honestly looked up at the stars on a clearer night than tonight. All the light of the stars and the brilliant white moon funneled into this caldera, and what I saw shocked me to the core.

A great giant cloud of stars rose up from the horizon, and a billion pinpoints of light sparkled around it. It wasn't the Milky Way. I wasn't looking toward its center from one of its arms. There were no spiraling arms at all actually. It shone like a giant hazy yellow gem. A super cluster of stars, more numerous than I could count if I put a whole week into it. Surrounding the luminescent sphere were progressively less dense clouds and rings that orbited around it. It was as if we floated on a lone rock high and far above it all. Purple nebulous clouds of young stars glistened in the distance along with an array of blues, reds, oranges and whites. I was left speechless. It had been so long since I had last bothered to look at the stars. Actually, I don't think I ever once bothered to truly look at them since I awoke in that northern forest one day.

Chris sat herself down beside me, tucking her legs into her chest and wrapping her wings around her knees. Her tail swished and scraped gently across the roof's shingles as she looked up into the inky dark sky. I picked myself up off the ground and sat up right beside her. Then I tried to find where in the sky she was looking.

Chris extended one wing and talon into the sky, “Those stars right there.”

“Which ones?” I asked.

“Right of that big blue one.”

“That blue one?”

“No, the other blue one.”

Star gazing can sometimes be a frustrating affair, but eventually we were both looking at the same thing. It appeared to be a collection of stars all close to the same luminosity that stood out against the backdrop of countless weaker ones. Chris continued, waving her talon in the small area of the night sky.

“Those stars right there. The one that looks like a man.”

“...If you say so?” I said dubiously.

“Come on, Laven,” She said playfully. “There are his legs and his arms with a spear. That's the Pauper. Then over on his left is someone else. A big gown worn by a woman. The Princess. Next to her is a four point diamond. Oh oh oh, and next to the pauper is a giant boar charging at him.”

Chris was nearly bouncing up and down pointing out constellations in the alien night sky. To see something so far removed from home was enough to sink my heart. But the bombastic and childishly energetic Chris was enough to dispel that feeling, and I hung on her every word. It blew my mind to think she looked completely shell shocked only a few minutes ago. How does she do that?... Or maybe I should ask 'why'?

“So, that's what the song is talking about?” I asked.

“Yup,” Chris said with a bright smile. “The Pauper and the Princess used to be lovers, but the pauper died on his way home from an adventure to secure themselves a home after they were to be wed. She then ended her life in despair.”

That's not the kind of story you're usually that positive about. But she continued, and it would soon all make sense.

“Then they were reborn. She was born as a princess of a rich and powerful kingdom. But the man was reborn as the pauper. They grew up separated; but as the story goes, they both felt as though someone was missing their whole lives.”

Chris's talons moved and contorted into strange positions as she spoke and waved her wings about in the sky above us. I think she was just doing it for emphasis, but it seemed intentional and had a predictable pattern to it. I thought of shadow puppets.

“One day, the wizard, Gaudric The Wicked, grew furious with the king and cast a spell that summoned a mighty boar. That boar thrashed and destroyed the countryside for years. The king's knights and soldiers couldn't stop it, so the king called for heroes from across

the land and beyond. But the king didn't have any money left—the boar had destroyed so much—so he offered all he had left... His only daughter: The Princess. He offered her hand in marriage to any man who could slay the beast."

I thought I knew where this was going. Chris's face was absolutely radiant as she continued the story; her eyes fixated on the constellations directly above us.

"Many heroes answered the call. Many noble men. But many died, were wounded or fled. However, one man would go into the broken woods and return. The pauper was just a peasant who worked the fields for his lord. One day he was sent into the city for an errand where he just so happened to catch the quickest glimpse of the princess. He fell in love at first sight. Then he remembered the challenge. Like a man possessed he hunted the boar. When he found it, they had a great duel. The pauper dodged the charging boar many times till it became so enraged that it reared up on its hind legs. It prepared for the greatest charge that it had ever done. But the pauper was prepared and had been waiting for just that moment. He rushed forward and put his spear through the boar's exposed heart. But it did not die. It vanished. So the hero kept searching and happened upon what the boar was guarding. The wizard's lair. He confronted the wizard, and when the wizard tried to summon his pet, the pauper ran him through in the wizard's moment of confusion. In Gaudric's lair, the pauper found a gem. The four point diamond. It was what fueled the wizard's terrible spell."

"I take it this is heading toward the happily ever after?" I asked.

Chris's smile dimmed a bit as she turned to look at me, "Not really, sadly... The pauper returned the gem to the king. But the king would not believe him. Even when the gem proved true, he accused the pauper of stealing it from the true hero that must have slain Gaudric and his boar. But before the King's men could take the pauper away, the princess saw him, fell immediately in love and threw herself on the hero. She shielded him and pleaded to her father for mercy and to listen to his story with an open heart. But the King was not prepared to let his daughter marry a mere farmer, and her actions only enraged him further. That is when the gods took notice. They noticed at last the stone which had been stolen from them. They noticed the princess and the pauper would never be, yet also noticed the two souls had been together before. They were so moved by their love that transcended even their powers over life and death that they were moved to tears. So while the king, his courtiers and all his men watched, the gods took the two in their arms. They turned into light then rose into the heavens. That night, these constellations took shape."

Chris pointed toward a string of stars in a near perfect line which connected the two constellations.

"So now they are together. Forever. They'll never be apart again."

The two of us did not say a thing for some time. I sat there next to her and let her story sink in. We watched as the Princess and the Pauper glittered in the heavens above and moved together in unison as all the stars traveled from horizon to horizon. It was a bitter sweet tale, but I felt more uplifted than not. Creating stories from the stars seemed to be a universal pastime. It was not so different from home after all... Except... Given how this world operates, the story might actually be true...

"It was a lullaby," Chris said at last after the long silence. "I would make them all the time... For Vio."

Vio. Princess Violetta of Domdracveria. That's right. Those two were long time friends. Very close friends. You could not be faulted for saying they were like sisters.

"Vio always loved them. I'd tell them to her every night before we slept."

Chris was a few years older than her, so I suppose that would make her the elder sister.

"Did you make that story just now then?" I asked.

Chris didn't respond right away. I looked down from the stars to see a complicated expression on her face. It left me a little worried. She had just been so energetic, seemingly rebounded, but now she looked depressed yet again. Maybe it was just because she sensed apprehension in my question, but she perked up slightly and continued all the same.

"No-" She said, her masculine tone completely absent from her voice.

That threw me for a loop.

"-no... Someone told me that story a long time ago. I was just trying to remember how she sang it."

I didn't say anything nor pry. I decided to wait and see if she would continue talking on her own. She would do just that. There was something that Chris had to get off her chest. That was why she dragged me up here. I could feel it. A distance still existed between the two of us. I had a feeling she'd surrender that ground soon.

"I lied to you before... I'm Sorry... Truth is, I never actually knew my parents... My real parents... My mother was one of the old maids at the castle..." Chris laughed a little and put on an awkward forced smile. "I even heard one of the young maids wet nursed me... She didn't like it... Having to suckle a little monster, but she was forced to." It pained her to say that, but she put her fake smile back on and

wouldn't be stopped. “The old one was much kinder. She was an old spinster who had never married. She had looked after many kids, but never had one to call her own. That kind old lady raised me like her own long lost daughter she never had.”

Chris expression was distant and forlorn now. Memories of this old woman deflated the half-baked smile she had spent far too much energy making. Her eyes were no longer on the stars above but on the horizon far away. A shaky voice only drove home what that meant.

“This isn't sounding like the pleasant memory like you'd have me believe,” I said.

“Eh he he,” She laughed weakly, giving me a little smile that died quickly before returning her gaze toward the horizon, now with a slight frown. “You might not believe the next part. Until I was about five summers old... I actually believed I was human... Isn't that funny?”

She tried to pass it off as a joke but failed miserably. Her smile was gone, and the cheery voice she tried to put in its place came off as empty. She held her wings before her and stared at the three talons crowning each forearm.

“How could anyone look into a mirror and think that true?... When you look like I do. But I did.... Until I met Deron.”

Prince Deron of Domdracveria. Violetta's older brother. The brother who waged a civil war that tried to depose her. He was born without a family signet ring, and his sister was. Hard to believe a baby could be born with an emerald encrusted ring on their finger that grew with the child... But while uncommon, these kinds of things are not so far fetched here. But Deron's troubles didn't end there. He was desperate to prove he was the rightful king. He thought through feats of daring he'd win back his by birthright that was so unceremoniously handed off to his baby sister at the moment of her birth. Even though he was very young, he said he would tame a wyvern... Bend it to his will...

“Their father's advisers suddenly introduced themselves to me one day. They were now the regency council. Vio and Deron had lost their mother when Vio was born, and the king had died during a tournament shortly after... A fatal wound, a piece of lance shattered in a joust and got into the joint of his gorget. Many think because his heart and head wasn't in the fight... They told me I was going to meet the prince. I was excited... and honored. When I went to met Deron, I thought I would finally have my first friend. He was about as old as me. They filled my head with ideas that I'd be like a sister to him too. I was so excited... But when we met... right away.... he started treating me like... a thing. I didn't understand. He waved his stick around and hit me. He commanded that I let him on my back. I said no. 'That wasn't a very fun game', I said. I didn't want to play that. Then he got angry. He

said that was what I was for. So I yelled back at him. Then he started hitting me. I got angry and pushed him away."

Chris flexed and rubbed the talons on her forearms together. She stared at them as she remembered a feeling and a memory.

"I cut him. Cut him bad. He screamed. He screamed really loud. They took him away. I never saw him again till the castle. But you were there. You know how that story goes..."

Chris's voice started to choke a bit as she went on.

"But after meeting him... No one ever punished me. No one praised me either, but I knew I had done a bad thing. I wished they had punished me. It made me think I was different. I didn't want to think I was different. It took everything I had just to believe I wasn't different whenever I looked into a mirror. My mother would keep repeating over and over again that I wasn't. Whenever I asked she did it over and over again, so I believed her.... But when they finally figured out why I acted like I did... They took her away from me too. I didn't have anyone left but my thoughts... Until I met little Vio. They said I would look after her from then on. So I played with her. Protected her. Sang lullabies to her at night. Slept in bed with her. When things troubled her, I went out and dealt with them. All the while... She never cared what I was. I was just 'Chris'. It didn't matter who and what I was. Where I came from. I was happy. So happy. For a long long time..."

Her eyes glistened and shook.

"Did I ever tell you? I never even flew before I was ten summers old. That's unheard of... for a wyvern..."

Her voice sank low, but she had too much momentum to stop and began to speak faster and faster.

"I only did it when Vio begged me to. She could still hardly find the words, but she wanted to see me fly... And you know... It came so naturally. I did it the first time I tried. I couldn't pretend I was mother's daughter anymore. But it made Vio so happy. She didn't treat me any different. Whenever she cried, I said I would be her knight. Her hero. I would puff out my chest and say I would beat the darkness back. I'd take flight, save the day, then she'd smile again..."

She was nearly tripping over her words now.

"So I kept doing it... I thought that would all go on forever. Until Deron started moving to take the throne. He wouldn't stop till Vio was dead. I didn't want to believe it, but I still fought everything he threw at her. Deron was like a brother to me too. He was Vio's brother, so he was my brother too. That's what I wanted to believe. But that's all done now. Vio is safe now. She- She's all grown up now... She's even bigger than me now. I was taller than everyone. I was taller than all the other wyverns too. But Vio... Vio sent me away. She didn't need me anymore."

Chris's face was wet now, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. She tried to be undeterred and talk as she was starting to have trouble talking.

“But I still had you. I pledged myself to you. You had done so much for me in so little time. You never gave up on me. You put up with me. You were even brave enough to fight for me... To do the ritual with me... But what... what if... what if you ever don't need me anymore?”

Chris rubbed one wing across her face to try getting rid of the tears. But without a hand to do so, it was difficult. There was snot running down her nose now. It was unsightly, but I didn't look away. Wiping her tears away with the arm that had been broken before, she is disgusted by the thought and switches to the other.

“What will I have left then? I couldn't be a person. I was always a monster. I... I couldn't be a sister... I never had a family. Not a real one. I couldn't even be a fake sister.... Not forever... What if I couldn't be your dragoon anymore? WHAT ELSE WOULD I HAVE?”

That was the last of it. Chris had no other words to speak. Everything bottled up inside that heart of hers had been ejected into the still night air. Chris had spent these last two weeks tormenting herself and trying her best to hide it. Hide it behind that mask and hide it by running away while being unable to run far enough. She was afraid her life amounted to nothing more than a continuous clash of her beliefs, her desires, and reality. Chris had so far lost every battle. She assumed an injury or sickness would rob her of what she had right now. What she had now was based upon not just her identity, but what she is. If she lost that as well...

It was a lot to take in. But calmly, reassuringly, I reached out and placed my left hand on top of the talons on her wing which she had cast aside on the roof between us. I wrapped my hand around the sharp talons, with points wicked enough to rend steel with ease. I did it without hesitating. I did it almost immediately after she was finished. It didn't matter they were instruments of death. Not right now. I clenched them tightly. As if they were just fingers on another hand.

It took a bit for Chris to notice. Her bawling stopped, and she looked at my hand on top of hers with raw reddened eyes. She sniffed back a few times before it finally hit her. Her jaw hung low, and her eyes opened wide. I decided that I too, would speak from the heart. And I wouldn't stop. No matter how cheesy the lines were that came gushing out.

“You'd still be a girl. You always have been... A bit of a tomboy, but a girl all the same... And I haven't made it a business of mine to leave any friend behind. Not if I can help it. There's no injury you can get that will make me give up on you. There's no sickness you

can get that will stump me... Even the one you got right now. Because right now I'm relying on you. I'm prepared to take on whatever comes along with that. You stick your neck out for me like you did back at the bridge, and I'll fight another giant living suit of armor for you. I won't ever forget what you've done for me. I don't expect to forget whatever it is you will do for me in the future."

Chris's face was frozen still in shock. But slowly, gradually, a smile returned to her face. Tears still streamed down her face, but I had a feeling that wasn't a problem now. And I wasn't done yet though.

"And believe me. Violetta has not given up on you. I could tell from the look in her eyes when you met again at the castle. I could still see it in those dragon eyes of hers when she sat on that throne before we left. She sent you- because you wanted to go. Right? I figured you would have figured that out while you were catching up when I was out cold."

Chris bushed aside a new tear and answered, "She wanted to know about what we did before returning to the castle... She spent most of asking to go on about what you did."

An old shiver travels up my spine. A familiar chill that caused my whole body to shake and robbed me of my ability to breathe for a moment... A gnawing phantom pain too? I shook my head, deciding to ignore it and press on.

"Anyways!..." my voice croaked. I gulped down to get my composure back again, "But you did... Didn't you?"

Chris looked down at the roof, but I reached out with my other hand and pushed her chin back up. I needed to look her in the eyes and see if she was telling the truth. She blushed when I did so, but I swallowed my half of the embarrassment.

"Yeah..." She finally said, her eyes quivering a bit, but never looking away.

I pulled my hand back away from her chin and smiled.

"Remember that. And remember what I also said. You do whatever it is you want. Don't let me tell you to go away. You just be stubborn like Rose is. You feel like you have some duty to do? Join the club; Susan isn't going anywhere either... It'd actually be better if you stayed out in the open too. Sometimes Minte gives me the chills, even if she doesn't mean to..."

I was running out of words to say, and my reassuring speech quickly became a rambling train of words. When I finally caught up with myself, I shut up and just let the moment be itself. I let my eyes wander back up to the stars and let myself get lost in them. But I couldn't distract myself forever. Eventually my eyes came back down, and I snuck a quick glance at Chris. She looked star-struck too, but she hadn't torn her eyes away from me at all. My heart skipped a beat at

her face filling with... longing?

"Ah ha ha, "I laughed weakly. "Well, we don't have much night left. I better get back and try to get some more-"

When I tried to shuffle away, I snapped back down to the roof like a fully stretched rubber band. There was a moment I was left dumbfounded, and I was slow to process what was going on. I looked over toward Chris and then looked down to see my hand was pinned to the roof. I was far too slow in moving it, and Chris's other wing had sandwiched it. I had a snowball's chance in hell of freeing it from between both her forearm talons.

Chris's tail—which had spent most of its time up here plopped motionless against the roof—swayed back and forth behind her now. It seemed it, along with she, had been fully reanimated. She scooted her bottom closer toward me, bit by bit. She slowly and enticingly closed what little distance there was between us. She moved closer until her wings and my hand were both squeezed and sat upon by us both. When I looked up, Chris's face had bent down so that it was level with my own. There was a gravity well in her eyes that I could not escape, and my heart beat faster and faster as our bodies pressed closer together. When Chris's face leaned in closer and closer, my mouth instinctively moistened. I knew damn well where this was going, but I could no longer muster any strength to resist it. A current carried me along, and my own face was pulled toward Chris's as she too continued to lean closer and closer.

We stopped briefly for one quick moment. Our noses had touched and then locked in place, side by side. We were staring into one another. I wasn't fazed in the slightest by her gold reptilian eyes as our eyelashes were close enough to snarl together with every blink. Each of our breaths tickled the other's face. The smell of the mountain air could no longer contest with the smell of Chris that filled my head. A distant sting of sulfur, yet dominated by tickling sensation of hot spice. Neither of us could wait like that for long. Whatever it was, it also filled Chris's head up and caused her eyes to glaze over. We both raised our chins at the same time, and the shock of our lips touching gently together shot through me like a static shock.

The playful peck and rubbing together of our lips soon gave way as our mouths opened in union, and our tongues met and slid past one another. We got carried away, and both of us sought each other out, and our tongues began to wrap around the other. My own tongue immediately felt like it had caught on fire. A tingle overwhelmed every crevice and soon my entire mouth, even my palette, stung gently. The sensation of fire spread just as quickly as Chris's hot pepper smelling saliva poured into my mouth. Every breath scorched its way down my throat. The feeling caught me off guard; sweat began to pour out from

my every pore. I recall only once when Chris and I had been alone like this. Together like this. But we were starved, dehydrated, low on oxygen and trapped behind a collapsed mountain. Now I was no longer numb. My mind was free of worry and for the first time I truly felt and tasted Chris. It was like tonguing a fresh oily habanero, yet I couldn't pull myself away. Sweat drenched me completely as Chris's and my bodies slid and grinded against one another.

We greedily pressed out faces together, each plunging to seize something for ourselves, only increasing the passion and pleasure for us both as we did. When we at last ran out of breath, only then did we separate. Our tongues hung briefly out of our mouths where a thin trail of crystal clear spit formed a delicate string that kept us both connected. It hung low and finally broke, and our eyes opened and fixated on each other.

A wry smile spread across Chris's face, “Ho ho ho... What's the matter? Can't handle the heat?” She said in her deep voice, playfully in character.

I reached around with my free hand, gliding it quickly over one of her horns, rummaging it through her pastel pink hair to cradle the back of her head. Without a word, I pulled her toward me again. Her eyes opened in surprise as I kissed her again; this time aggressively pushing her tongue back with my own. She let out a short stifled yelp in her throat, but her body relaxed again, and she let me do as I wanted.

Chris lifted her submission of my other hand, but only because she was suddenly unsatisfied with how close we were now. She crawled on top of me and sat herself down. She held herself up by her knees; her talons further down and next to my own feet dug into the shingles of the roof like hooks. Her body lowered until her soft and muscular ass pinned me down by the thighs. A soft marshmallow feeling of pure soft muscle cushioned the space between Chris's hips and myself. She had superhuman strength in those legs of hers, and her glutes were not far behind. The curvaceousness of her rump was pure muscle, yet had the hallmark feminine and fertile form.

My hands were now free to do what they wanted, and they reached out for Chris's bare stomach. I traced my fingers along the fair white skin around her navel. My thumbs massaged their way up her abdomen toward her chest; my fingers tickling their way up her thin svelte waist. She couldn't bear the sensation and leaned into me, letting her voluptuous chest smother my head like a pair of pillows. But my hands eventually reached them and crawled over them. My hands sunk into the soft pillowy flesh. I pulled my head free and rubbed my cheek up against the side of one soft mound. I kept going until I ran out of breast and came to one of her exposed pits. Our bodies were hot

and wet with sweat, but that didn't stop me at all. I reached out with one arm and grabbed her by the bicep. I pushed her wing high and traced my tongue over the salty and sweet white skin.

The wyvern squirmed again as she fought back snorts of laughter which died prematurely in her throat. I kept going until there was nothing left to taste, and Chris playfully pushed me away. She was completely red in the face while she did so. But my tongue was still burning hot from earlier, and I felt compelled to extinguish it with something. My hands crept back to her breasts where I slipped my hands under the fabric of her top. I got my fingers under the fabric of her top, through the underboob, and then pulled the top back up so that it hung around her neck along with her now sweat drenched white scarf. I expected those puppies to come tumbling out, but there were more than enough muscles in those shoulders and chest to keep them perky and relatively in place.

I sunk my hands into them and ground the nipple of her left breast in the palm of my hand causing Chris to pant and heave her chest. My fingers sunk deep into soft fatty flesh now hanging loose and drooping ever so slightly in the night air. They were massive. They had to be E-cup at least, and they never seemed to bother her at all, even when flying. I couldn't even hold them in my hands, I hadn't realized they were actually this large until I finally felt them in my hands.

My heart beat faster and faster, and I was quickly overcome with a new surge of pleasure. I leaned forward and caught her right flushed red and erect nipple between my teeth, and my mouth around her small pink areola that melted into the flawless white skin. She let out a loud moan and shifted her weight on top of me as she squirmed due to sensation. I playfully nibbled and prodded it with my tongue as I massaged both of her breasts with my hands.

“Mas- Laven...” She cooed while wrapping her wings around my head and cradling me into her bosom. “You're like a little baby.”

While she teased me, I greedily feasted. Meanwhile a painful pressure had been building in my pants. Chris's hips had been rubbing back and forth over my thighs and into my groin for a few minutes now, and it had nowhere to go. I'm sure Chris could feel it too, like a speed bump she crossed over again and again. Finally, Chris pulled her wings back from around my head and with a flushed red face pushed me away by the shoulders. I was disappointed, but I didn't resist as Chris's talons worked their way down to my hips. Her face contorted as she tried in vain to work the zipper, so I quickly pulled it down for her. Lest she tear my jeans apart in the process. I freed my twitching member and exposed it at last to the chilly night air.

Chris didn't touch it, but her eyes look at the pulsating monster from my pants longingly with an erotic daze on her face. Then she

slowly shifted her weight down off my thighs and planted herself between my legs further down the roof. I was not sure what she was up to until she gathered her massive breasts between her wings and squished them together. My penis was standing at full attention but suddenly vanished between the cleavage of her breasts. The shock of warm to cold then warmth again causes me to grunt aloud which puts a smile on Chris's face when she looks back up at me with a playfully erotic smile.

With an enticing smile crossed between her justice persona and the overflowing desire of a woman, she spoke to me, “He he- I can feel it twitch... I can feel your heartbeat.”

She wanted to touch it; she wanted to feel it but lacked the hands to do so. That's why she squished and confined it to her breasts so that she could feel the warmth of its blood and flesh seep into her, right into her own chest. She stayed like that for a moment; with my shaft pressing up against her heart trapped between the cleavage of her massive rack. But when I got used to the heat pouring out of her, she sprang into action. A slick lubricant of her sweat and my pre mixed, and she lifted her breasts up and then let them drop back down. I felt the motion and tightness of her breasts rub along my shaft and glans in an endless undulating wave. My hands threw themselves backward to hold onto the roof shingles behind me as I panted for more fresh air as my body heated up.

“Take that. And this,” Chris said playfully with each stroke. “Special technique: Justice~”

Chris tore her eyes away from me and looked down. She let my cock crown her cleavage then wrapped her lips around it. Her soft girlish lips sucked and tugged on my glands as her tongue prodded and slipped around the very tip. All the while she pressed her wings and talons against her breasts to squeeze and rub my staff. As Chris's saliva was added to the lubricant of sweat and pre, I felt the gentle tingling sensation spread down my dick and into my hips. The sensation was too much, and she quickly understood. She doubled her efforts and soon enough I was brought to the brink.

“Chris... I'm gonna-!”

When the pulse began at base of my shaft, even Chris could not contain it with her breasts. A surge of white cum shot out like a geyser into Chris's mouth. Her eyes shot wide in surprise, but she suppressed the urge to cough and refused to pull back. Her lips sucked greedily until the last and final of many contractions in my hips ceased. I didn't even notice that my hips had risen off the roof on their own, until I came crashing back down. The wyvern pulled her head back, and her full red lips separated from my penis. My penis had likewise turned an even deeper shade of red. But I was also crowned

with a glaze of white as a thin trail of my spunk escaped from her lips. Most of it, however, was still in her mouth. Then she titled her head back and, with one gulp, let it slide slowly down her throat.

I looked at her, speechless. There was still a thin trail of white making its way down between her cleavage while she slowly opened her eyes and looked at me in a complete utter daze of ecstasy. When she looked down and saw I was still rock hard, her cocky smile came back despite her hazy erotic eyes that contradicted each other. Yes. You could say I've spent the last two weeks or so backing up, but I think I could take five-

-There would be no break. Chris lifted herself up, turned around and sat down on my hips. She closed her legs tight, keeping them between my own legs. Her thighs caught my shivering red and blood engorged member between them. A slow gasp was sucked through my parched throat. The soft, firm, slippery and tight muscles squeezed down on me like a vice. I wasn't wrong to have exaggerated on those legs after all.

Chris shook and rocked her hips back and forth, pushing down on my dick, then letting it spring back over and over again while she tightly squeezed in on its sides. I was still raw, so I could hardly take it as my whole body twitched. Chris's legs kept mine apart as they lay steadfast between my own, and I couldn't hope to get the girl who was a head taller than I am off of me. But I was being driven out of my mind, so I was capable of equally crazy actions.

Every muscle in my abdomen went into overdrive, and I launched my back off the roof and pressed myself against Chris's surprisingly small and girly back. I wrapped my hands around her thin waist and then began to caress from hips to breasts. It was sudden and took her completely off guard. She couldn't hold back the moans. Her own body was burning hot with desire like I was, but she had yet to relieve herself of any tension building up inside her. One of my hands grabbed hold of her bottom undergarment and savagely tore it free from her loins. Previously shed scale armor and talon ornaments included. I plunged my fingers into her now unguarded crevice between her thighs and found a hot twitching fold. With my index and middle finger, I pulled them aside playfully as my thumb found a little nob above them. Chris's back arced, and her head was thrown back while I savagely pushed, prodded and tweaked it relentlessly.

Her pussy was so wet and so hot. When I stopped teasing the outside I easily plunged my index and middle finger together into the depths of what lay beyond. Chris's moaning voice got hot and heavy. She couldn't even muster a single taunt anymore. My face crawled over her back, kissing the soft white skin until I once again found her other untouched armpit. This time she raised her wing high into the air

herself as I greedily sought to extinguish the fire on my tongue with her sweet sweat. I traced my tongue over the soft muscly flesh and kissed it over and over again. My other hand scooped one of her breasts, and I tumbled it up and down. The three points of attack were too much for the girl. Her breathing got heavier and heavier. Her tail—which was now draped over my shoulder—began to wag back and forth and sometimes slap me hard on the back, but that didn't stop me. I kept licking, fondling and plunging until at last the girl's whole body shook. She covered her mouth with one wing and let out one long muffled yet high pitched moan.

Chris's body rose up into the air, setting me free from her pin, but she just as suddenly came back down. She struggled for breath, but I wasn't done yet. With my hand near her womanhood, I reached down for my member and guided it by feeling around with the tip. Eventually, I found my way back to her entrance. I slipped it down over her engorged clitoris and tickled the head over her labia until I found my goal. I pulled my hips back and upwards until I couldn't do so anymore. From tip to the base of my shaft I felt a burning hot sensation envelop me. I wasn't prepared for it, and neither was Chris; who let out another moan she couldn't cover in time with her wing.

I didn't need to say a word, and neither did she. We committed ourselves to our roles, and while I reached up for both of her breasts and fondled them, Chris rocked her hips back and forth in rhythm with me. We started slow, but we couldn't keep that up for long. We got greedier and greedier together. Chris's wings reached back over her shoulders, and her talons wrapped around my head. Her back arched and gave me more freedom for my piston movements back and forth. All so I could take myself all the way to the base of my dick with every stroke. Both of us were still raw, but we ignored that and went faster and faster until the sound of our skin slapping against one another joined out moans. The creak of the shingles was quickly drowned out, and the still mountain air on that villa's roof was filled by the sound nothing but of us having sex.

My member had yet to recover, so I worked in vain for some time. But Chris was rapidly approaching another climax so shortly after the last. We grinded against one another; she rode reverse cowgirl on top of me before I sat up to hug her from behind. When at last I felt the stirring in my loins return, I reached down with one hand and found her burning clit. With the palm of my hand, I pressed down on it and rubbed it slowly at first, but then savagely as we started to get carried away again. Chris's body couldn't contain itself; I could feel her rapidly approaching another climax because of the folds tugging, pulling and squeezing me from inside her.

I thought I had spent my load before, but I could feel something

heavy building up in my balls. When my scrotum began to tuck back up in preparation for the next eruption of Old Faithful, I felt something even bigger than before. I lost all control and reason, and I wanted it to happen right away. I couldn't take the build up and tension anymore, so I started really go at it. Chris was also getting impatient. Her hips rose into the air and dropped back down in harmony with my savage thrusts upward. Her sweet sing-song moans matched my ugly barbaric grunts. I wrapped one arm around her waist while I continued to rub her womanhood with the other. I felt I had to hold her down lest she fly away. She squeezed down on my skull with her backward stretched wings; her tail patted and smacked me hard on the back, all while she squeezed me even tighter down below.

At last I could feel the surge starting from my hips. There wasn't anything I could do to stop it now. Even the near strangling pressure of Chris's insides working up and down on my shaft couldn't stop it. I stopped my wild thrashing and put three last deliberate thrusts into it. On the final thrust, I let loose a cascade of cum into Chris's drenched pink pussy. It felt like I was peeing instead. A fire hose that sent giant globules of semen pulsating up my penis and splatting the inner walls of Chris and staining her all white. I had to struggle for breath as it went on and on without end. I had to rock my hips back and forth a few more times in desperation to get it all out. I wasn't sure my mind could handle the constant explosions of pleasure ringing around inside my head and burning in my hips for much longer. When the last few spurts were still getting the last of it out, even Chris' vagina couldn't even take any more. A white hot liquid seeped out from the impossibly thin spaces between her folds that clung to me so tight. It all bled onto thighs and began to pool on the roof beneath us. She still clung tightly on me and contracted again and again to milk me of every drop I had, not stopping even after a minute when I was clearly long since empty.

Spent at last, I collapsed on the roof. Chris fell backwards on top of me, and we lay there on the roof with the stars above us, twinkling indifferently and nonjudgmental above us. The wyvern rolled off my chest and nestled up beside me which allowed me to breath freely, and I coveted the mountain air to get the wind back in me.

A warm afterglow came over me while my eyes wandered lazily toward the constellation Chris had spoken at length on before. The Princess and the Pauper had traveled further across the sky since I last laid eyes on it, but the string that bound them held strong. Then a rogue thought came into my head. It pushed aside the haze that had taken over it until now.

Dove and hawk, take wing and form the shore/From stars an eternal bond has grown.

The last two lines of Chris' lullaby... But I don't remember

hearing anything about that first line in her story.

I turned my head toward the wyvern clinging to my side, “Chris?”

Her head buried into my chest as she continued to cling and cuddle.

“-Yes, Master?” She finally replied.

“Who are the dove and hawk supposed to be?”

Chris didn't answer. She remained still with her face buried into the side of my chest so I couldn't even tell what- Plumes of steam billowed out from her ears once again.

“Yeah...” I say to myself... “Stupid question...”

I turned my head back toward the stars which would soon give way to the dawn and clear blue skies.

Chapter 70

The late morning sun had risen high into the sky, and the world was at peace. At the very least in this secluded corner of it. The skies were marred with the occasional cloud, but they provided spots of shade with a risk for rain. I wiped a thin layer of sweat from my forehead as I stared up and admired the gorgeous sky though the shade of my fingers. It was the second of three days in our retreat. As the sun rose earlier in the day, everything seemed to have returned to the blissful status quo. Although I must confess that the definition of bliss I had resigned to using may be different.

Breakfast had been a reserved affair. All we had to eat was some dried bread which we shared at the dining table... A round dining table with plenty of room this time. Lessons had been learned. My company was a whole other thing entirely. Chris's boisterous reverie had returned with a vengeance. She was no longer shying away or hiding behind a mask like she had been for the past two weeks. Her threatening the forces of evil at every opportunity and loud encouragements to everyone shook up and shattered the relative silence which had settled upon us.

The girls took it all in different strides. Rose and Chris both joyously fed into each other's enthusiasm. They shouldered the heavy burden of keeping the lively early morning conversation alive. I think Rose might not have let it show, but she must have missed having someone closer to her own wavelength to cut loose with. While Minte remained steadfast and unmoved, Susan's face was a complicated thing to decipher. A certain calculus was needed to figure out what direction her thoughts and feelings were going. But unlike the assassin, who is nearly unable to convey emotions, the anubis certainly can, and she does. She tried; but in spite of her calculated cool, calm and collected persona, her true nature was irritable. Shoshanah couldn't hide who she was for very long in aggravating situations.

Susan's eye twitched every so often while the two girls shouted and played at the table. She must have lamented in silence over her powerlessness to stop them. That's what her being slumped over in resignation told me. She spent the entire meal staring at me with an expression caught somewhere in the middle between begging for help and blaming me for everything. Still, she couldn't hide that she sometimes allowed herself some good cheer over Chris's return. But I couldn't shake the feeling she also looked at me with suspicion. It made me think that she had a pretty clear idea how I had managed to drag the wyvern out of her depression... It is Shoshanah though... I think it would be safer to assume she did not think it, but knew it. I

shouldn't underestimate her ability to infer exactly what happened last night. At the same time, she seemed okay with it. Maybe even a little impressed and proud of me at the same time?... Perhaps even a bit jealous?

Of course, I would never ask that to her face. I can predict how furious she would get. It's better to just let that sleeping dog lie.

This was the second day of rest, but there was still a job which had to be done. Tomorrow afternoon, after one last night and morning of rest, we'd set off for the lands south and west of us. There we would come upon a loose collection of fiefdoms. A quagmire of exclaves and enclaves run by bickering barons, lords and counts. A wide selection of noblemen who would usually call this little place their vacation home throughout the seasons. Yet they were now at each other's throats. And while they rattle their sabers at one another, a cult was-

“Laven! Are you paying attention?” An angry voice shouted at me

It roused me from my daydream. I lowered my hand and remembered exactly where I was. I was standing in the fields far from the villa. The shade of the trees and its colorful relaxing gardens were all but forgotten in this place. Rose and I were standing upon a baseball diamond sized plot of brown and black scorched dirt. Yesterday it had been a beautiful emerald field of green, the kind I would shamelessly nap upon. The gentle breeze would tickle and the flowering weeds and tall grass would make for a soft bed. That was until Rose got the idea to transform it into a training field. One controlled burn later and it was a patch of scorched earth. Yes, even today I can't escape her training.

I didn't have the energy to put up with it today, but Rose's persistence and insistence was not something I could stand up to. Especially not when I sent her packing last night so I could actually sleep. I didn't get much of that last night, so I had nothing to show for it. Now my back hurts from sleeping on the roof for a few hours too... At least I didn't catch pneumonia or something. But being spooned and crushed in a giant pair of wings might account for a few other joint pains I got right now.

To my left and only a couple meters outside the dirt field was a hip high crumbling stone wall. Minte was sitting there and slowly kicking her slender legs out. She didn't seem to have anything better to do and followed the two of us. Perhaps she was curious when Rose grabbed hold of my arm and dragged me out here. I envied her. She looked relaxed. Peaceful. So peaceful that a duo of colorful butterflies fluttered around her while she watched and held out her tiny hand for them to land upon. It was very serene and-

“Laven! Laaaaaavennnnnn! What did I just finish tellin' ya?”

Rose shouts again.

I hastily stood at attention and respond, “Awareness.”

Rose's face was prepared to chide and taunt me, but the expression on her face and words in her throat died. She had to clear it with a cough and murmur of, 'well done', which was barely audible in the distance. I too breathed a sigh of relief. A wild guess saved me some trouble. She was unarmed, so I had my doubts she intended to pummel me into submission and call it endurance or 'sink or swim' swordsmanship.

“That's right!” She soon yelled again, pointing her clawed finger at me. “Battlefield awareness. Before you fight the man, you must first fight the place where you are fighting the man.”

As her tail swished behind her excitedly, with embers leaping from it and smoldering, Rose stood confidently with her feet shoulder width apart and her other claw on her hip.

“And before you fight the man, but after you fight the place where you fight the man, you fight what the man fights with!”

My head was starting to hurt. The sun shining in my eyes through a break in the clouds didn't help either. Neither did the headache from what was probably me dehydrating. I've had to stand here and listen to her go on and on about the same thing for some time now without a drop to drink since breakfast.

“And tell me, Laven, darling, what do you find in the place where the fight the man but also makes what the man fights with?”

I haven't the- “Dirt, Rose. Lots and lots of dirt,” I say while motioning my hand over the field she had created. “Dirt which used to be a perfectly good napping sp-”

“Tsk tsk tsk,” Rose rebukes me while wagging her finger at me. “Not just any dirt... The father of all dirt!”

I hope I'm making the right expression right now. The expression that tells her that she nor I have any idea what she is talking about.

“Swords, spears, hammers, bows and arrows... All just tools a bit better than the first. But they are all still just the same old. Just copying the first tools. It doesn't matter what we call em now... Before you can defeat the man, you must first best the weapon. To best the weapon, you must defeat the one that came far before it.”

Something had punctured my brain and now a steady flow of air was slowly causing me to crumple to the ground.

“Do we really have to do this now?” I asked. “We're supposed to be relaxing. You can't just work out forever; you have to take a couple rest days here and-” A rogue thought hit me and compelled me to suddenly ask, “You're not angry about the lake thing yesterday, are you?”

“I recall many years ago-” Rose continued, ignoring my subtle pleading for her to stop. “While I was on pay to guard a caravan which ran Pidgi's Pass far in the east; we were attacked by bandits mid day. They had sapped the pass and half of it crumbled, sending pretty much all the wagons tumbling to the ditch. Then they came out of the woodwork. I got rattled something fierce. Lost my sword in all it. But!” Rose told the story while getting more and more fired up as she went on, swinging her arms around like swords. “In the woods, there is always the parents of all weapons there ever were, are, or will be.”

From behind her back, Rose pulled out a single tennis ball sized rock. She held it out to me with a grin that stretched ear to ear. She was obviously very proud of herself and her philosophical ramblings.

“With just rocks and sticks I dis backed five of em till the rest started running. That bonus I got me seconds at all the inns for a month!”

I steeped in to correct her quaint vocabulary, again, “Dispatched. The word you're looking for is dispatched, Rose.”

“Oh? Is that so? They have word for the sound backs make when breaking now?”

With a sore back of my own right now, I felt a pang of sympathetic phantom pain run down my spine. Those poor, poor bandits....

“Words can fail, but sticks and stones will never let you down!” Rose said with a smile.

Just as suddenly, she slipped back into a somber mood while she continued to reminiscence. I wished Susan would hurry up with the last of her preparations. We're supposed to be having a meeting about how we're going to be dealing with this Sabbath cult. I'd rather be taking a short nap so I'm fully awake when-

Rose's spirited lecture continued and broke my train of thought, “Or that time I and the Sisters of Callowick were hired to relieve a siege of a castle at... Some place or other... Where is not important!...” Her voice then turns serious for a moment before slowing reverting back to her mirth, “When swimming across the moat. Yes. Swim.”

Oh, she's still mad about the lake alright.

“We had to break the lines to help those in the inner keep still holding on when we got there. But a big boulder from all the rocks they were dropping on us hit the water and tossed us around. But I managed to SWIM to the shore... I lost my sword again, but they had been dropping rocks all day. So I climbed up and fought my way to the gatehouse. There wasn't any time to be looking around for what I dropped. With just... Yes, rocks! For a true warrior, anything is a

weapon. Never think bad of the stick and stone, even if ya got all the iron in the world you're swinging around. Iron is just a fancy rock!”

I was having a hard time staying awake. It was harder still to keep paying attention. As I rubbed my eyes to get the sleep out of them and cracked my back to loosen and limber up, I looked over to Minte who now had another three butterflies dancing about her. Her face had not changed as she continued to watch them intently and let them rest on her head, antennae, hand and shoulders.

Rose continued while I was distracted, “And that is why before you learn to defeat the sword, you must defeat the rock. Before you can weather the arrow, you must first face... the stone!”

My eyes wandered back toward Rose. There I was met with a freeze frame. Time seemed to have stop, but so did I. The colors of the world around me were inverted for a brief moment in time, and I spied Rose. She was just past the apex of a pitcher's throw. In the space between us, traveling fast, was a gray blur. I had enough time to utter a quick, 'ah', before something cracked hard against my forehead. My head went ninety degrees upward, and my body soon followed it. I hit the ground with a thud as my back hit the dirt.

Rose's voice, a little shaken, muttered in the distance, “...You were supposed to dodge that...”

As I stared up at the sky once again, I felt the bump quickly forming on my forehead already... Then the pain sunk in. My hands flew up to my forehead and tried holding the bump back while I writhed on the dirt and squirmed.

I heard the patter of Rose's feet as she came running over. She dropped to her knees beside me and grabbed hold of me with her claws.

“Are you okay, Laven?”

“You hit me with a rock!” I yelled back.

“Stone.”

“Stone... Whatever! It hit me in the head! I got few precious memories as is... Why the head?”

“You were supposed to be paying attention!” She shouted back and pouted.

Rose's scaly palm gently applied itself to my forehead and rubbed back and forth in a circular massage.

“There there,” She said softly. “Rose is here.”

“Don't think you-”

Like a miracle hot compress, I felt a soothing warmth wash up against my forehead, spread through my rattled brain and eventually over my entire body. The joints in my body relaxed, and the blood already clotting in my forehead flowed freely again. I could actually feel the bump on my head slowly subside.

“-can just- aaaah~,” I moan, unable to hide both my surprise and relief at the pain washing away.

Rose's eyes were pretty calm for someone who just risked cracking my skull wide open. There was a bit of sadness in her eyes, a tinge of regret, but she looked to have all the airs of a professional nurse with all the proper bedside manners. I knew that was far from the truth and she was just winging this... But she was doing a damn good job. The palm of her claw continued to gently massage my forehead and scalp. She had lifted my head off the ground and set it back down on the soft firm muscles of her tanned lap. Her fingers soon ran through my hair while I lay there overcome with warmth, and the heat of the sun above was nothing anymore. I wasn't even sweating anymore.

When I looked back toward Rose, she was blushing, and her face was twice as close as it was before.

“I should kiss it better too...”

My eyes were unfocused for a moment, but I sprung partially back to life, “Whoa, hold on!”

I tried to protest, but it didn't do any good. But when Rose's face reached the halfway point, I watched as the black slit pupils of her amber eyes shifted off me and onto the ground behind my head. Her blushing face slackened, and her jaw dropped slightly. For a moment, I was left to worry I'd left a bigger patch of blood in the dirt than I expected.

Rose reached out with her free claw and picked something up instead.

“Laven! Look!” She shouted while shoving something in front of my face.

It was gray, small and oblong... With a splotch of red in the corner... I'd recognize that stone anywhere in an instant. Even if you put it in a lineup with a hundred others. Then she turned it around to the other side where a large slice had been carved out.

Her voice was trebled with awe, “...The stone broke...”

“You threw it hard. Really hard. And fast... Let's not forget how fast you-”

“-You defeated the stone...” She mumbled.

Even I stopped rolling about. What the hell is she talking about?

“-I what?”

“The stone and you met. And while you both fell, it is the stone that is broken. And you're not... On the first try too...”

“...First try? You weren't seriously going to keep-”

“Laven!” Rose hollered.

The stone was tossed high into the air and far away. She was

as excited as one could be, and she had thrown her arms up in celebration. Rose's eyes sparkled like gems, but that just might be me seeing stars. Probably a result of the concussion I just got.

She bent down, and her face touched down on the ground zero of my pain. Her lips planted themselves upon my welt again and again. She only pulled back so that she could touch back down and kiss me all over my head and face. She completely lost her composure and was now letting her emotions guide her on autopilot.

I immediately felt another wash of warmth pulse through me. Like a ripple, it went from my forehead to tips of my toes. Unable to contain herself, she trapped my head between her claws in a vice grip and then brought her lips to my own. I had just gotten over the pain, but now I was suffocating instead. I tried to grab onto her and push her away, but I didn't have the strength. I kicked my legs in a futile effort a few times before my body relaxed. Partly because I was running out of breath and oxygen, but also because my body was beginning to heat up.

Rose's tail was wildly lighting the air on fire behind her. That could only mean two things. She was prepared to fight, or... Yes. She was already slipping one finger under one of the thin shoulder straps of her top. Using my head... Breaking a stone with it. I had achieved a victory over both the forces of velocity and geology. It was too much for the battle crazed salamander to bear. I think it brought back vivid memories of how we first met... If I didn't do something soon-

"Ba da da dum da dummmm-" A chorus shouted from high above, which grew louder and louder with every note. "-dum ba ba de dum de DAAAAA!"

The last few notes rang out clear and far before Chris came spiraling from the skies above and crushed the earth below with in a perfect ten point landing. Standing tall and proud within the field was Chris. Her white scarf blowing dramatically in the wind and over her shoulder. With her wings folded over her chest, she looked down at both of us from behind Rose's back.

"Susan tasked me with the important mission of letting you know that she has finished her preparations. We are now ready with everything we need to know... can know.... "

Chris trailed off when she finally stood at ease. I imagine from her point of view—me on the ground with my head on Rose's lap, and my face a mess after Rose had her way with it—that it would be pretty hard to cover up what just happened.

"O-on our next... villainous knaves..."

Oh, so she was going to continue on like nothing happened?

"-standing in the way of justice for all! Those vile cretins who prey upon the defenseless youths. Poor girls whom all should be

protecting from the evils of the world!”

The wyvern worked herself back up. I had to admit it was a nice save. She was blushing a little, but she successfully managed to get her talons on the flow and redirect the mood. I could even hear the bones and flesh of her muscles clench like a leather glove when she flexed her wing talons into a makeshift dramatic fist.

Rose hastily slipped the band of her top back on her shoulder. When she let out a sigh, the mood had indeed been doused. I was saved by the bell... But now that I think of it... Susan is back at the villa. Now Chris is here... She said all three of- Wait, Minte is still here too! I figured she would have intervened. Maybe it wasn't far fetched that she would have leapt up and deflected or sliced that rock in midair. What has she been- I looked over to where she was before, but she seemed to be having her own problems.

Minte had not moved. There were now more than just two or three butterflies around her. I lost count after eyeing over twenty of them. Many of them were at rest on her; flexing their wings. Many more were still fluttering about her. The assassin sitting on the wall was frozen stock still. She must be afraid that any errant move might squish or harm just one of the dozens of butterflies.

“...Help,” was all she said with one quiet and emotionless cry for help.

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When we returned at last to the bowels of the villa, Shoshanah had prepared the largest and most imposing room in the entire villa. It was a needlessly large room with an extravagant black varnished table. It was about four meters long and was illuminated by skylight and alchemical fire lamps. Oil paintings of long departed important men and women or portraits of them when they were younger lined the walls. Their eyes and ears observed, with calm indifference, the countless closed door meetings and secret deals which had transpired at this very place for more than a century. Perhaps for the first time in a long time, or perhaps in the first time in forever, a plan would be hatched here to do some good.

I took my seat at the end of the table while Susan stood at the head where towers of books she had read were gathered. Behind her a flip chart board waited idly by. Seated adjacent to her left at the corner of the table was Chris who sat there with a cocky grin. She had her wings crossed, and I could see her knee bounce up and down in anticipation while she pushed off the ground under the table with her talons. Her eyes sparkled as though she had already prepared a thousand different ways to denounce our opponents. There were probably a few harebrained schemes to actually do anything about

them in there. Somewhere.

Seated halfway down on the opposite side of the table was Minte. She was as silent and stoic as always. There was also her impressive ability to meld seamlessly into the room. Which was impressive since there wasn't a hint of green for her to camouflage into, and the entire room was well lit. Her presence, however, was near zero as it was almost all the time. Minte's eyes were fierce and focused though; she was in the moment and not distracted by any novelty of nature. Ideas were no doubt already turning over in her mind. If there was anyone here I'd like to hear from about how to actually track this cult down, it would be from her... If she could be roused to speak something more than a couple monosyllabic words at a time for once.

Rose sat just to my right on the side of the table where we occupied the whole far right corner. Even the battle crazed salamander seemed intent on our meeting and battle plan. I half expected her to look ready to fall asleep at any time. If we were going to do what the Church and whomever they have hired to this point could not, then we were going to need a plan. With girls like Rose and Chris on our side, having a plan would probably be useless. The planning itself is always invaluable, and I hoped everyone else at the table understood that.

“Laven?” Susan asked with a concerned and inquisitive look on her face. “For what reason is your forehead currently bandaged?”

My hand reached up instinctively to touch and perhaps hide the cloth wrapped around my forehead like a bandanna. It was just a little left over linen from my earlier and more grievous injuries. There wasn't any wound that needed to be dressed, but the soothing enchanted cloth strips would act as an ideal painkiller till my headache went away after a certain someone clocked me in the head with a fist sized rock.

“I... Fell down. Outside. On my head. Just trying to keep the pain away for now. So I can focus... Don't mind me. Please.”

The anubis was suspicious but eventually relented when she finally sensed it was better to leave well enough alone and get on with it. We had better things to do than waste another hour or so while Susan lectured Rose about her recklessness. I was past blaming anyone. I should have known by now to keep my eye on Rose or these kinds of things can happen... Maybe I did get hit too hard.

“Very well. Then let us commence our strategy assembly for surmounting the Sabbath threat.” Susan said, sounding very official and dignified.

Her paw reached for the flip board and pulled back one large sheet of primitive white paper. Written and drawn on the paper were a series of hieroglyphs. It was all very typical. Stereotypical, I should say. Susan had prepared a series of visuals aids for what she had learned from pouring over all those books yesterday and this morning. There

was a distinct lack of perception and a missing dimension in everything, but it was very neatly done. There was a precision in it that I'd expect from a laser printer. I didn't expect those paws of hers could have pulled it off.

"The New Moon Sabbath..." Susan explained. "Just one of many individual cells in a much larger organization simply called: The Sabbath."

She traced her paw's index claw around a large symbol at the center of the page. It was a pentagram with an eye in the center of it. Crowning it were a pair of demonic horns curling up, back down and around like a ram's. Each sat on the upper left and right of the pentagram. There was something inherent to the symbol. Something dreadful, a feeling that sat in the bottom of your stomach just from looking at it.

Susan continued, "The Sabbath and its numerous affiliates have existed for centuries. Millennium. It has been viewed with suspicion and hostility since its first account in recorded history. Long before the Church of the Almighty, they have been persecuted for conspiring and encounters with demon kind."

I put my hand up to interrupt her, "We've already seen demons before. We saw them walking around Vilmheim and in the Demon Realms. And they did it without hassle or breaking a sweat. What makes the Sabbath so different?"

"Because demon kind have not always walked upon the earth freely. In times before the current Demon Lord, it appears as though demons could only roam freely out of hell and the netherworld when summoned and then bound to this plane of existence."

Planes of existence. Great. This is gonna get complicated. I lean back in my chair and wait for Susan to lay it all on thick.

"From all the records, texts and accounts I have been able to access in this Villa's library... The Sabbath is the one institution which routinely interacted with these otherworldly beings."

"Odd lot those girls are," Rose said, rudely interrupting. "Don't care about money. Never saw one eat or drink anything outside a bit of fun."

"That's because demons do not require food or water like you and I, Rose." Susan said after her eyebrow twitched a few times from Rose blabbering out of nowhere. "They are not of this world, unlike monsters, so they don't require such things to persist."

The anubis flipped to the next leaf of paper with a whole new arrangement of designs, pictograms, writing and the like. It was all a flow chart beyond my understanding... or ability to even read... But she continued.

"Life force... Sometimes even the souls of the living. That is

what demons require for sustenance. Until they become a powerful enough presence in this plane. Only then can they survive on food and water alone. Many more simply forsake this world and decide to take their prize or prizes back to the hells and netherworld. Life force and the souls of mortals are a much sought after luxury. The quantity and quality is seen as necessary to achieve status and power in those realms."

Chris's wing pounded loudly into the top of the table and caused the whole table to bounce off the floor.

"Villainous!"

I think she just wanted to remind everyone she was still here and paying attention.

Susan's eyebrow twitched again, but she pressed on, "But demon society itself is very strict and regulated. They cannot steal life force or souls without consent... Nor without a binding contract. However, that written or verbal consent need not be sober or well informed. That is where The Sabbath comes into importance. The Sabbath is a group of like-minded humans, mortals, seeking the power which demons possess. Magic powers, knowledge, beauty, strength... certain.... favors."

Oh, she blushed a little with that one. I think I get the idea what she meant from the way she flustered and had a hard time saying it.

"...These humans would offer themselves, their energy and their very lives to the demons in exchange for all of them. The Sabbath itself was and still is predominantly run by women. Women who gave themselves over to demons in exchange for magic power. Masses are held on special occasions to call the demons onto them... Hold... F-festivities..."

And she's blushing again.

"A-anyways!" She suddenly shouted, her voice cracking a little. "It's all very debouched and depraved, and even the pagan faiths, long before the Church, refused to tolerate them. When demons walk the earth freely... One may be the next Demon Lord. A warlord with the hells and netherworld behind him. A being who can unite and subjugate monster kind into an army. Such an army that formed a thousand years ago brought humanity to the brink of extinction."

Rose perked up in her seat, "What? An army?"

There was excitement in her voice.

"There is already a Demon Lord," Susan replied, quickly deflating Rose's excitement. "That is not a concern from this Sabbath cell. Our concern is their string of recent abductions. Many girls have vanished without a trace."

I gritted my teeth. It wasn't any better hearing it the second time after the first.

This corner of the empire didn't have an official name or title. They simply called it: The Marches. It used to be a staging ground for the old Empire. All the food, goods and wealth produced in this place was dedicated solely to feeding the war machine that stood up to the previous Demon Lord. There were no vassals to bicker with, it all belonged to the Emperor and his generals. When the enemy was gone, and the army kept afloat by a total war economy dissipated, those left behind who once tilled the fields and shepherded the pastures claimed the strips of land for their own. When a later Emperor wasn't looking, they started calling themselves nobles. If they had the land and the money, who was to claim they were not? You wait a few generations, and no one has a foot to stand on in order to take it back. They still paid their tithes and their taxes in the end, so who would care? Certainly not any Emperor since then.

Countless minor lords and ladies fought over scraps of land they claimed through flimsy birthrights. Since the earliest records were all hearsay, anyone could conjure up a claim on someone else's land. If someone had the money, the men and the will to get mixed up in the madness, you could carve out your own fiefdom. Add in a few small demon realms dotting the land which wax, wane and push these entitled lords closer and closer together... You get some fierce competition for what's left. Add in some pretender lords and those willing to take their coin and promises to do their dirty business... You get a nightmare scenario.

But who gets caught in the middle of all this? A few thousand children who quickly become orphans. If someone wanted to abduct them, even from the Church run social houses and orphanages, this was the place to do it.

"So why now? For what purpose?" I asked.

"Sacrifice," Minte answered coldly.

Everyone at the table turned their gaze toward the assassin. No one had wanted to think it, let alone say it, but she did so easily. Everyone else's eyes cast downward in unison. No one could think of a more plausible answer to refute her. We believed it to be true already.

"Unacceptable!" Chris shouted again.

Her wing pounded the table loudly and caused the whole thing to once again bounced up into the air. That violent outburst was likely the only way to dispel the terrible feeling sinking in her chest.

"All of em?" Rose asked, even her voice trembling a bit. "Last I heard, boys are a more popular target for criminals and slavers than girls."

"Boys or girls... They still have life force and souls." Susan said, pushing on and trying to mimic Minte's cold determination. "Perhaps... People would be less likely moved to find the girls."

Now that made me mad. What made me madder was that it could be true. Susan wasn't done though.

"They could require a great deal of magic on a stringent schedule. After all, this is the first reported and confirmed activity by any Sabbath cult in four decades anywhere within the Empire. Even with the Demon Realms. There may chance be a hint of desperation in their actions. It would explain their reckless choice of actions. Maybe the girls represent some necessary reagent?"

The table went silent. Susan continued so that the process would not stagnate.

"This is merely conjecture, but the almanac predicts that in a few days time a full Red Moon will occur."

A Red Moon? A harvest moon in spring?

"What records of Sabbath spells and rituals I was able to glean from records not burned and disposed of... It suggests to me that the increase in abductions relates to its imminent arrival. The rare phase of the moon will most likely act as some amplifier for some ritual."

"And everyone is probably better off never knowing what it's for," I said solemnly.

"We won't know it until we find em," Rose said resolutely. "And when we do-"

Rose pounded one fist in the open palm of her other claw. I found myself nodding at her suggestion.

"If they're waiting till then, then maybe those sacrifices are still safe. Not only can we stop them from abducting anyone else, but we can save all those kids too."

The idea put spirit back into everyone at the table. Susan sighed happily and carried things along.

"There is only one thing remaining that we know," Susan said as she flipped over one more sheet of paper.

The page was dominated by one image. It was very green. An ugly profile of an old woman with sickly green skin, a hideous curved and prominent warty nose, black cloak and huge hat. It looked as though it were drawn by a young child with colored wax. Looking at it felt like a slap to the face. A slapstick slap, but it was jarring nonetheless. While Susan's face was very professional, and her paw gestured dramatically on the page to point it out, the absurdity was too much for me. Better yet, she hadn't seemed to notice.

The whole table was very emotional, but that didn't mean all those feelings were not just a tube sock in the wind. I pursed my lips and held back a snort. Right beside me, Rose did exactly the same. We caught each other's attention, but that only made it worse when we looked at the comical face of someone else trying to hold back a laugh.

Everything was supposed to be very serious and somber, but an absurdity is still an absurdity. It looked like poor man's older and uglier Wicked Witch of the West.

Susan continued undaunted and oblivious; she hadn't even turned around to look yet while she continued, “Records and intelligence we received prior from the Church points to the likely leader of this Pale Moon Sabbath to be an individual only known as the Crone.”

Susan's serious voice was almost too much for Rose and I. We both hunched over and grabbed hold of one another by one arm. We desperately tried to console and calm each other down, but it got harder and harder.

“This individual is- What do you two believe you are-?”

She was ready to get mad at us, but then she turned around and saw the drawing.

“Chris!” She shouted while turning to face the wyvern.

“What? Your composite lacked impact,” Chris rebutted.

“I told you that I would remain solely responsible for-”

She lost her cool for a second but held her tongue and decided to shut her mouth and just seethe a bit instead. Rose and I broke down laughing. Meanwhile, Minte look back and forth at Susan and Chris arguing and Rose and I laughing. She titled her head in confusion while the antennae atop her head felt around for some invisible answer floating in the air.

Once the tension had broken everyone calmed down and went silent for a bit. I decided to stick my neck to get things rolling again. My throat was still a bit raw though.

“So... What do we take from that?”

“We take it very seriously, Laven,” Susan growled. “the Crone is a name I found mentioned in records dating back centuries. Perhaps from a time further back still. I do presume from these records that it is not an inherited or a title which is passed down. It always refers to one individual with common characteristics and traits. Therefore, I would say it is safe to assume that this individual is an ancient witch. A witch whom bristles with knowledge, wisdom and magical powers. She would have to in order persist for so long. And as to how she would manage to prolong her life span to such a degree... For an ordinary human...” Susan got lost in thought for a moment and muttered that last bit quietly to herself before continuing. “-Dozens of lesser witches would have also flocked to her, so that they may bathe in her power and study under her tutelage.”

“Some old lady and her wriggling magical fingers don't scare me,” Rose said confidently.

“Neither does it concern me, Rose.” Susan declared rather

surprisingly. “If it is a battle of accumulated knowledge and magics, then I am confident I can at the very least hold her powers at bay long for any one of you three to dispatch her and her followers... Finding her is a whole other ordeal... Beyond even me.”

Now. If there were anyone who could track down a target, it would be our assassin. I slowly traverse my eyes over the table and to Minte's eyes, where she was already watching me intently.

“Minte?” I asked her. “You can do that, right? Track down this Crone?”

Minte looked away. Her gaze turned toward the ceiling, the ground between her legs, over her shoulder and then finally back to me. After thinking about it for a few seconds, she looked back into my eyes and slowly shook her head.

“A name isn't good enough.” She replied quietly.

I slumped over a bit, defeated, “Figures. It could never be that easy.”

“Need a scent,” She then said.

Her antennae danced on top of her head excitedly as though they had a mind of their own and were eager to volunteer for the job.

“So we just need one clue then? One scent from where we know she's been?”

Minte nodded.

“Hmmmmm,” Chris hummed. “Easier said than done. No doubt such a vile character would not reveal their true form easily. Villains of her caliber always have some secret identity or never appear at all.”

“I would usually question Chris's assumptions...” Susan quipped. “But I must confess that I find myself in agreement.”

“What?” Rose said, dissatisfied with how easily they have given up. “Come on! If that's it, we just break some fingers till we hear what we need and get on that trail!”

Always the direct approach with this girl.

“That is precisely why the Church has done nothing but fail,” Susan replied. “It is no doubt the sole reason the Grand Cardinal is at her wits end and has contracted the mission to us. I see no other reason to risk her reputation by dealing with the likes of us. Nothing other than having already exhausted all other alternatives seems plausible.”

“A few paladins and inquisitors and she goes to ground.” Chris mused, leaning back in her chair and staring up at the ceiling.

The table went silent. We had at last reached the hard part. We knew our enemy; we knew what they were doing but not to what end. There was only one lead, but the leader was as illusive as a grain of sand on the beach. If we walked down the mountain and into The

Marches with our shoulders squared and taut, we'd get no further than the Church's goons. Worse, they take extra care to cover their trails. If they had magic on their side, they could be hiding anywhere. The only place we know where they are is-

"Hold on," I said.

Everyone's attention turned toward me.

"We do know where they are going to be. They've been abducting girls from under the nose of the church."

"Yeah yeah!" Rose jumped up and slammed the palms of her claws on the table. "We ambush em when they try to kidnap again."

"If the Church has taken due diligence, which I know they have..." Susan said while waving about the intelligence she got from the Church in front of us. "...Then they must have some unknown means to do so and remain undetected. Furthermore, I doubt our ability to remain hidden-."

"That's not what I mean," I jumped back in and risked Susan's ire by interrupting her. "We keep tabs on a few girls. Wait for them to get abducted and track them down..."

The table went silent but not in a good way.

"I don't like the idea of using bait either. But our options are limited. Minte, can you do that?"

Minte shook her head slowly and replied calmly, "Track one. But... Those girls... No strong smell.... Difficult."

"One," Susan said disappointed. "We cannot select one girl at random out of a multitude of many and hope for the worst and rely on luck to succeed."

"And if it fails..." Rose added. "Probably fail... Say Minte loses the mark. We're worse off than step one. Can't risk that."

The brain storm in my head was now building beyond a simple tropical system.

"Say we don't pick a bait then. We be the bait. They've been getting more and more reckless, haven't they? This Red Moon is soon, right? If they're worried they don't have enough sacrifices, they'll go for the biggest haul yet and be too quick about it to take care. We set up a trap for them at the biggest gathering of them all."

"Laven..." Susan said, pleading subtly for me to stop.

"What about you then, Susan? Or any of you for that matter. Disguising yourselves as one of the girls? We have the right paper work so that the Church will have to cooperate. They'll hit the place and they'll catch one of you in the net. Then Minte can track you down and lead us right to them. We have the power to-"

Susan was unable to hear me go on any further, "My illusions are meant for inanimate objects, Laven. Intended only to

disguise traps and doors. Nothing more. It is too taxing to muster enough power to change even some of my external features so that I may pass as human, let alone crudely apply an illusion to another living being... So I discovered with that... Duke..."

Yeah. I would have preferred to not remember that incident. Rose, Susan and I swore ourselves to secrecy after all, never to speak of it again. For good reason. Chris and Minte titled their heads. Their confusion, when looking at the three of us, become distant and despondent, perfectly in sync.

"A-anyways!" Susan flustered, desperate to change the subject. "The timing at night when my powers are at their weakest and ready to reset with the ending of the day, the distance in which its potency exponentially decreases unto failure, and lastly, the absolute certainty that a cabal of magic adept witches would be able to sense an illusion... Lest we not forget a lone monster's aura among human children... It does not make it feasible."

Susan bowed deeply toward me.

"I apologize. My divine magics are not suitable for such applications."

Another dead end. I slumped over in my chair and let my forehead drop against the smooth veneered wood. I breathed in deeply and exhaled deeper. I could hear and feel everyone else do the same.

The more we thought, the further we seemed to get from a solution. We even struggled to find where we can begin.

"So..." I muttered weakly into the table. "We got to do something unorthodox that the Church hasn't tried yet. We got the ability to get the church in on, well, whatever... A girl Minte can track, who won't alert the witch's magic senses, can't be a monster and still be kidnapped so that they can be the Trojan Horse and get inside the Pale Moon Sabbath's hideout."

I let out another sigh. I rolled my head on the table to rest my cheek on the cool surface. Then I spotted Susan, with her chin cupped in her paw and deep in thought. She suddenly looked up at me. Her eyes narrowed and sparkle gleamed in them. Then a grin slowly spread across on her face. It sent a shiver down my spine, and I sat upright on instinct.

Minte was watching the anubis ponder, then her antennae sprang to life and stood completely upright. It was like a lightning bolt had struck her from above. Her eyes slowly turned in my direction. I looked frantically between the two of them before I looked over at Rose right beside me. She was sitting in her chair, arms crossed, tail whipping back and forth behind her. Her face was flushed, embarrassed, then she looked up at me as well. Their collective gazes were intense enough to make me feel as though I were wilting.

At the far end of the table, Chris was the only one who didn't seem to have a clue. Her face was plain as day confused, but she still followed everyone else's gaze with a stupid expression on her face.

“No.” I said weakly, shaking my head.

Absolutely not. No way in hell- Shoshanah pulled out that gothic lolita maid dress from somewhere. Where did she-? Why does she still have-?

I stood up. Tried to. A pair of hands were on my shoulders faster than I could blink. With incredible strength, they pushed me back down into my chair. Two tiny hands wrapped in a blackish-green bodysuit. I looked over my shoulder to see Minte standing behind me, holding me to the chair. There was a blush on her face.

“Please, no?” I pleaded.

Chris remained seated, where she remained innocently oblivious to what was going on around her. The blank and wide eyed expression with a polite smile told me she wasn't going to be any help. Beside me Rose had progressed from blushing to include laughing quietly. Just like before, she was desperately trying to stifle a laugh behind a claw clasped over her mouth. Only this time I wasn't laughing along with her.

Susan left the far end of the table and started walking toward me with a mischievous smile and shadow over her face. It was a sinister look accentuated with a shadow cast by her long hime cut bangs that hid her eyes. There was a lot of pent up resentment behind that smile. I struggled once more to try getting up, but Minte's iron grip was too much. All I could do was I shake my head in desperation. I tried to protest, but my lips only flapped uselessly until it all came out at once, but too late and to no avail.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Chapter 71

The heel of my right foot rose and fell in rhythm with my knee's buckling. A patter of clicks echoes inside the stone room and count the seconds as they pass. Each moment in time was no less arduous than the last. With my arms crossed over my chest, and my back slumped in this chair, I'm far from the paragon of good humor. I wasn't sure if my face was conveying a satisfactory amount of displeasure, but I was certainly trying.

My eyes locked on an old woman sitting across from me. An ancient old lady in a black nun's habit complete with the distinctive white trim. She read over the contents of a sealed document I hand delivered her; the eyes in her sunken and wrinkled face sluggishly followed each cursive rune. It only elongated my suffering, and I started to get the impression she was savoring the seconds she didn't have to look at me. She was dragging all this out on purpose.

She wasn't much of a sight to behold either, not even as a soothing grandmotherly figure. Her face resembled a hunk of dried fruit more than a human-being. Her hands and ankles were likewise almost skeletal and obviously very frail. When I first laid eyes on her, I was concerned an errant breeze might disintegrate her into dust. Despite all that, her hazel eyes behind a thin pair of reading glasses were fierce and strict. She had a stern badger-like expression; the kind of face which was perfect to scare small children with. All in all, her position in this place made a whole world of sense to me because of it.

Adjacent to the open window behind her, where an ancient oak even older than she stood, were shelves of books and religious trinkets. A thousand hours worth of theological reading lined the walls and stood stalwart next to bronze stars and reliquaries. The whole room gave off a timeless impression. The whole abbey gave off that impression.

My wandering attention was called back with the sound of her withered groan. Her skeletal arms fell back onto the desk where in front of her the letter slipped through her thin, long and bony fingers.

I didn't try very hard to mind my manners. I hadn't been met with exemplary hospitality either, so sue me.

“Are you convinced now?” I asked with agitation thick in my voice.

The old nun slowly plucked the reading glasses off her bulbous nose and placed it on top of the unsealed letter.

“Even so-” Her raspy voice began.

“-Oh no.”

I interrupted her, raised my hand and violently prodded my index finger on the letter between us.

“No. That red wax seal is genuine.”

“I see it. Mr.... Laven?”

“That's right.” I answered.

“Mr. Laven. This is genuine for sure... But even so... I cannot tolerate this farce.”

She seemed to be stuck in one gear. There wasn't even a reverse. She had park, neutral and first gear only. Her face displayed it all, the drooping face of wrinkles that caused small children to cry. There seemed to be no room for compromise or discussion. It was her way or the highway, and so her poker face hardly budged. I couldn't completely blame her skepticism. It's been a rough three days of travel, but I hadn't come this far to back off now. The time I could have backed off came and went long ago. This room was as private as it could get. The walls here had no eyes to see nor ears to hear.

“You read the letter.” I said tapping my finger on the folded paper again.

“You are aware of where you are, correct?”

“Yeah. I'm exactly where I need to be.”

Need. Not want.

“This is an orphanage.”

“I know.”

“For girls.”

“I get that... Do you still think I don't? Is that what this interrogation is all about? I was sure we got over that first hurdle ten minutes ago. Believe me, if you had a groundskeeper, I would have opted for that. But this is a strictly all girl's institution. But even then, my plan wouldn't work.”

“No. We haven't cleared that hurdle.” The old nun said, her voice becoming increasingly gravelly and infuriated. “This is a house of the Almighty. A house where we look after his lost children. Not cater to... fetishists.”

Her eyes moved slowly from my eyes to my shoulders and chest. I felt a tinge of disgust and embarrassment when she did so. Why? Well, probably because of the brown peasant's dress I had on. I wished the dirty white bonnet covering my forehead and hair was larger so I could pull it over my face at times like this. All I could do was sit upright in my chair and squirm under the woman's cold stare while my legs crossed and rubbed up against each other.

That was by far the worst part. My body itched like crazy, and it was at its worst on my legs. I had to endure the humiliation of being shaved completely from everything below the scalp. The sheer terror of Minte's arm scythes giving a close straight razor shave like that... especially in the sensitive places... is not something I want to endure again.

Why did she even bother down there?

'But it's all for the disguise'. That's what Shoshanah said. She could hardly keep a straight face when she said it. Minte went along with it, Rose laughed and Chris didn't get what was going on until it was all explained in detail afterward. Even then, she also bought the plan wholesale and thought it was genius. When any hope of escape or rescue was gone, I just sat there and let it all happen. But I simmered and vowed my revenge. I wouldn't let something like this, in response to whatever I might have done before, make things even. But right now, it was the only plan we had. It was crazy, but it might be crazy enough to work.

“You think I'd waste this sealed letter to get my jollies off?” I said getting angry as well. “Did you ever stop to think about how much this letter is worth? Something that is so vaguely worded, mind you. I could have just bought what you're thinking of wholesale. I could have kept buying it for the rest of my life. No. I'm here on a mission.”

“You're in the wrong place then.” The nun said coldly.

“No,” I snapped. “I'm in the right fucking place. You've got an abduction problem. It's going to happen here, and it's going to happen very soon.”

“Mr. Laven... This abbey has stood on these hollowed grounds for centuries. Saint Vivian herself gave her famous sermon on motherhood on the spot where that ancient oak now grows. An oak that was planted by her. With that holy tree within the walls of the abbey, we need not fear any meddling from dark forces.”

“If you think walls a little taller than your head and a magic tree are going to keep you safe from this Sabbath, then you are putting the lives of every girl in here at risk-”

It seemed the old lady wouldn't be stopped midway through a sermon and talked over me with her stern authoritarian tone.

“Lo, for the children of the world are borne unknown to evil / But they are as ripe fields for its seed to grow / Pray the young ones be delivered from evil / like mighty walls, shield them from the world's wickedness / Embrace them in your bosom, and with your wisdom / just as towering cliffs of stone hold back the sea / The cold winds chill rebuffed by the hearth / Do this, and ne'er shall your children stray from our Almighty Lord.”

The old nun slowly reopened her eyes as if she had been consumed in a trance.

“For five decades, I have watched over hundreds of tiny lost souls. I kept them safe. I clothed them, fed them, taught them, raised them. Nearly a hundred weddings of girls who once graced these halls I have sat at. Dozens more I've seen awakened to talents and left with new brothers and sisters in arms. Some still reside here now as my

fellow sisters, and one will someday succeed me. With Saint Vivian's wisdom in heart, I have steered many lives from the brink of oblivion and back into the light."

"I'm not here to debate theology and parenthood with you," I said, now sitting upright in my chair. "I'm here to keep these girls safe. The only way to do that is take on the problem of these abductions at their source."

"And why does it matter to you, Mr. Laven? Is it for whatever Grand Cardinal Ulmpher has deemed to reward you with?"

Her glare were daggers, but I threw a stare back at her which was just as vicious.

"I would not trust a single girl within my ward to a mercenary such as yourself."

"And this mercenary is the last hope you got," I rebutted, pointing my finger at the old hag. "I'm the last hope your whole Church has got. No doubt you've seen and heard of Ulmpher's agents run from one side of The Marches to the other on a wild goose chase. Her knights have stood guard and protected nothing. The only thing that is there when they open the door in the morning are empty slept in beds."

The nun's face became grave, "Where did you hear that?"

"Everywhere! The lid is off that can of worms. If you were trying to keep that from being a rumor, you've failed. We've heard a lot of things and investigated them on our way here... Everything that's been tried up till now has failed, and you're running out of time."

Her foul mood had not gone anywhere, but her morbid curiosity was, "Time for what?"

"A blood moon. It will happen very soon. Three or five days from now at max. It could even happen tomorrow night. I don't know how far your knowledge of magic goes, but I have it on expert knowledge, from someone far older and wiser than you, that means this Sabbath's power is going to peak."

The old nun tried to look away and dismiss me before I finished, "Nonsense. Black Magic such as that hasn't had power in this world since- Wait. What kind of expert-"

Now there was an subtle tinge of disgust on her face. It didn't make her ugly wrinkled face any more palatable.

"Pagan!" She screamed and glared at me.

"Close enough," I said while shrugging my shoulders and slumping back in my chair.

After all, you can't be agnostic in a world where miracles are proven real.

Her mind and mouth were operating at different speeds, so when she had a moment to think about it more, a new realization dawned on her. Her wrinkly face slowly returned from the brink of fury

to her jaw dropping slightly agape.

"...Laven... Now I know the name..." The old lady said while she dusted off an old memory inside her senile head.

"So my reputation has gotten this far south? That should speed this up then. Which is good because we don't have much time left. Can we just leave our affiliations out this?"

Perhaps she sensed danger now, and not from something outside the room because she calmed right back down. She didn't press accusations of heresy any further.

"Time? Time till what?" She said, her voice shaking slightly.

"A blood moon, remember? When it happens... It doesn't matter how much protection you think you got for this place. This abbey is one of the few places which hasn't been touched yet. It's also the highest concentration of potential targets. I'd put money down on this Sabbath leaving this place for last and waiting for the right phase of the moon to come around. No one has stopped them so far. Why do you think they won't try? Are you willing to bet everything on the assumption that they'll fail?"

The pressure had slowly gotten to the stubborn old bat. The cruel and stoic expression of her face had cracked, and I could see the stress and worry which had been hidden behind all along. I opted to go in for the finishing strike.

"No one knows how they do it yet. Are they using some kind of magic beyond your collective imagination?... Is there someone on the inside letting them in?"

The very notion of that second one snapped her back to attention but only to decry and denounce the very possibility. I spoke louder to shut her out.

"No one knows. Why? Because no one has seen this Sabbath in the act. You got some pentagrams burned into the sheets and floors afterward, and that's the only hint you got to who is doing this in the first place. And it isn't just young girls who have disappeared. Isn't it? Some boys and men here and there; some women, young and old alike. What possible reason is there for that?... Because there's a high likelihood they were nearby or saw it happen. That's why they vanish as well."

The old nun was silent now, so it was time to get to the meat of it.

"Why am I asking you to do something so outrageous? It's because they won't notice me at all."

"I haven't the time for-" She tried to shut me down and pushed out her chair with a clatter.

"I don't look the part. I get it. You're wondering how you'd ever explain it to your girls. I get that... But this Sabbath is reliant on

their magic. I got one talent to my name. Magic doesn't work on me very well, you see? It'll be like I'm invisible to them. I got that tidbit on expert advice as well, so even if things go wrong, nothing will happen. Your girls will be safe, and when the blood moon passes I'll be on my way. You'll never see me again. If it does work, I'll actually see what happens. With that, something, anything, might be done. If everything goes exactly as planned, they'll catch me in the net too-"

Like an old boot caught with all the other fish.

"-And the best part is that they won't know it. I promise you, if they do go after your girls, I'll do whatever I can to keep them safe... Wherever they might take them. Then my friends will find me, and we'll bust their whole operation and return your girls safe and sound."

A Trojan Horse strategy. Minte tested just how far she could go and still catch my scent while we were on the road. She assured me that while the scent did get weaker, it got weaker linearly, not exponentially. If I could sneak out just one clue, she'd be able to pick up the scent and home in on me. The cavalry would be right behind her.

But for the first time, with one final push, I pleaded with her.

"Please, Sister Scarlet. I need more than you just turning a blind eye. I need your help... Your girls need your help."

The old nun had stopped, but now she let her old bones back down on the chair. She sighed once again and went deep into thought. I didn't pry my eyes off her for a moment.

Finally, she spoke again, "You can sleep by the alter-"

"Sister Scarlet..." I said, now slightly pleading, but also partly menacingly. "If those girls disappear... I'll be reporting back to the Grand Cardinal and telling her you disobeyed orders. I'll have no other way of explaining my failure other than you got in my way and put me as far away as possible from the girls I'm supposed to be protecting... What do you think she'll do to you and your entire legacy you've spent fifty long and hard years on?"

And here I was again, threatening old ladies in order to get what I need. I'm worried if this keeps up it might become a bad habit.

Instead of rebutting me further, the already scrunched face wrinkled even more. My words must have hit a nerve deep down in her thin and spindly bones. She may not like it, but the wax seal, stationary and signature of this letter cannot all be duplicated at once.

"Very well," She said at last. "But if any harm does come to my girls, I too will let the Grand Cardinal be aware. You should know she has a personal distaste for dealing with those matters."

My brow furrowed, and my teeth almost flared at her words and what she insinuated. But I gripped the arms of the chair till my knuckles turned white instead. If we let our misunderstanding and

mutual contempt for one another stop there, I could finally get to work.... If it could be called work.

We both stood up at the same time, stared at one another but did not shake hands. It was going to be one of those kinds of professional relationships. So as the sun was finally starting to set outside, the old lady pulled away from her desk. She walked with a spine which was bent an extra unhealthy thirty degrees forward and was too stubborn to even use a walking stick. I followed behind her at a distance at first, but I couldn't walk that slow.

"The girls will be finishing evening prayers now," the head nun said after three minutes of walking in silence. "Then they shall all retire for the day."

The sun hasn't even set yet, and they're being sent to their rooms under curfew? A tough life indeed.

"I'm aware of one room which has an opening. I trust you will let the girls be?"

I was getting sick of her suspicion, but I let it slide and ignored the barb, "Just consider me their big brother in drag. I won't be around for more than a week anyways. My companions are not that far away either."

I'll get worse than this from them afterward if anything happens. That much is for sure.

The small ancient corridors and winding hallways finally delivered the two of us from the central church and into the adjacent building. Before that, we had to cross the pristine green fields and past the ancient oak tree. It was a mighty oak indeed. It would take more than just a couple people to link their arms around it. The tree itself seemed to have more in common with a redwood than a simple oak. The majesty of its freshly born leaves that shimmied to and fro in the wind had a calming effect on the heart. I could understand the old nun's story about this tree having some power to it. But that idle power and whatever ward it gives off would not stop this Sabbath.

As we approached what I assumed was the dormitory, I scrunched my shoulders inward and tried to make my frame as small as I could. It caught the attention of the old lady.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"Getting into character." I replied.

There was disagreement on her face, but she turned back to look where she was going after a few awkward seconds.

"You are recently orphaned," She said at last. "We advise our girls to not pry newcomers for their stories if they refuse to tell them. If the story is tragic, you need not give the details and risk exposing a lie. If you are only here for a short time, that will buy all the time you need."

Sound advice.

"Passing you off as a child will not work... I have agreed to take you in because you have nowhere else to go. You will room and board with the other orphans until preparations are completed to frock you."

"Why the delay? Long holiday weekend?" I said jokingly.

She didn't think it was funny.

"That is the best I can arrange for you. The rest is up to you. If you cause a scene because you are caught, I WILL remove you. This abbey has a reputation to uphold."

The old nun stopped to turn and face me. She pointed a craggy bony finger at me.

"I won't fear whatever happens to me if you've already sullied its reputation beyond repair."

"So I won't win any prize at the county fair. Aren't all girls beautiful on the inside where it matters?" I said sarcastically.

I was just trying to lighten the mood before I went over the top, but this sourpuss nun wasn't appreciating my wit.

"...Mr. Laven..."

"Whoa now," I said, raising my hands. "You're going blow my cover like that. Let's just go with... Lola for a cover name."

"Excuse me?"

"L-o-l-a. Lola."

The sister had nothing nice to say, so she opted to continue onward without a word more.

Door after door in the hallways of the dormitory were shut and not a soul dared walk freely. From behind the doors, I heard many hushed voices, but the echoes of our footsteps quickly silenced any conversation until long after we passed. The two of us continued walking unhindered until we reached our destination. Runes beside the door spelled something I couldn't decipher, but this was without a doubt the room Sister Scarlet had mentioned once she stopped in front of it. I heard voices from within only a moment before, but now they had gone deathly silent. There was even an aura of dread seeping out from underneath the crack in the door.

The old nun reached out for the handle, pushed it gently and let the door slowly creak open on its own. The inside of the room was very spartan. It looked more like a prison cell than a dorm room. If it were not for the wooden bunk bed frames with the plain basic sheets straw filled mattresses it would nearly be a prison cell. It would only be missing the iron bars. Seated on the beds and frozen like frightened woodland animals were four girls.

I followed the old nun inside while still making myself as small and vulnerable as possible. I tried to avoid eye contact and play the

role of the shy and frightened 'new girl'. However, my relative towering height was no doubt making that a tough pill to swallow. I avoided making eye contact, but I did steal a few glances while Sister Scarlet was giving them the short version of our made up story. But before she got to the part of introducing me, she wrapped up her spiel, and I only caught the last few words of, 'lights out soon'. With that, she hobbled her way out of the room and left me to my own devices.

There was an awkwardness that permeated the room and was thick as coal smoke. It didn't let up until the girl who seemed to be the oldest gathered up the courage to stand up and offer me an olive branch.

"H-hello?" She struggled to say.

She was treading on eggshells, but there was a certain resolve to her voice. When I did finally look up I was met with a girl who couldn't be older than fourteen. She had brown hair down to her shoulders with brown eyes and cheeks blotted with freckles. She seemed the poster child for 'Plain Jane' and had a forgettable face, but her eyes did sparkle and had life to them. Maybe it was also the same generic clothing that each of the girls seemed to be wearing. Grey and unassuming. Simple, standard and uniform sleeping gowns. Simple enough that it might kill with boredom.

"Lola? R-right?" She asked.

She had to bend her neck back to look up at me, and she was afraid despite her attempts to hide it. I nodded my head and turned my eyes back down to the floor. At least I tried. This time she spoke up quickly and abruptly to get my attention again.

"My name is Feena!... I'm the oldest here. Been here since I was seven."

She turned and stepped aside to show another girl who was still seated on the bottom bunk behind her.

"This quiet girl here is Isabelle. We call her Isa. She don't mind if you call her that."

Isabelle seemed a couple years younger and was a fairer skinned girl with black hair tied up behind her head in two long braided pigtails. A pair of thick rim glasses covered her brown eyes which were busy studying me and frankly made me feel unsettled. It wasn't much of a curious gaze on her face, but rather a perplexed one. She gave off an air of someone more adept than Feena despite her youth.

Her first impression screamed 'nerd' to me. I dread to think what her first impression of me is. A tickling feeling in the back of my head ran rampant with paranoia. She was about to speak out at any moment and call me out on my bluff. My heartbeat got faster and faster at the thought of being called out so quickly, but she simply turned away.

“Hello,” She finally said with a bored voice.

A close call.

Feena continued, stepped aside again and motioned with her arm over the other two girls on the opposite side of the room. Huddled up together on the bottom bunk were two younger girls. One didn't look any older than five, and the other didn't look like she had yet broken ten. I couldn't get a good look at the youngest of the two because she kept hiding behind the other. She peeked out from behind her every so often, but when our eyes met, she quickly retreated again. The girl she was hiding behind was her polar opposite. Her black hair was cut boyish short, and her face was fierce with imposing black eyes. The thick eyebrows, stare and angry expression made me think she was a boy for a second, but she was a tomboy. She stuck out more than the others. More so than most people I've seen in these parts. Her features were mongoloid-like, very Siberian.

Most of humanity had been crunched from all the corners of the world into the boarders of the Old Empire for several hundreds of years a millennium ago. I suppose this girl was a testament to that time.

“This is Gloria,” Feena said while pointing at the tomboy. “The girl hiding behind her is Heather. Sorry, but she's a bit shy. Come on Heather, say hello to Lola.”

Feena's gentle pleading got a reaction out of the small child. Her older sister appeal and trust borne from that goaded the girl out from her hiding hole. I got one good look at her. Heather had a rather round head with a small face that slightly mismatched it. However, her long blonde and curly hair with blue eyes made me immediately think of a classic illustration of Goldilocks. This girl, however, was about a hundred times more timid than the curious home invader. My first impression of her was that she was delicate and skittish. If you applied a little too much pressure she'd shatter into pieces.

When I was about to speak and introduce myself properly, the sound of bell echoed off the hallways outside. The head of each girl turned toward it with a fright.

Feena clapped her hands together and took charge, “Come on now girls. Lights out time. Blow out the candle and tuck in, alright? Get lots of rest for our chores tomorrow!”

With a flurry of activity, the four girls scrambled about the room. They threw themselves onto the mattresses and slipped under the covers. Feena rushed over to a small stand in the corner of the room and blew out the only candle. Except for a curtained window with a bit a dusk sunlight pouring in, the room went dark.

“You can have the whole bunk on the far wall to yourself, Lola! But you gotta hurry!” Feena whispered as she rushed by me in

the dark and onto her top bunk.

I was left to try feeling my way through the dark and not stub my toe on anything. There was only a sliver of light to guide me. The window was small, no bigger than a shoe-box, and near the roof on the far side above my bed. When I hit my knee against the wood of that bed, I knew I had arrived. I nearly yelped, seethed and swore when it struck me right under the kneecap, but I restrained myself and crawled onto the mattresses to writhe in pain there. My pain only got worse when I realized the bed itself was far too short. I bumped my forehead on the frame above and hit my elbow against the stone wall while trying to lay down. The only thing I could do was curl up in the fetal position.

My eyes were still wide open even though I could hardly see a thing. I had my doubts about this plan before. Now I was living the nightmare.

Chapter 72

I'm not sure when I managed to fall asleep. At some point my eyes must have blinked, and by the time I opened them someone was rocking me back and forth violently by the shoulder.

“Lola!... Lola!” The voice called out.

I very nearly screamed out, 'WHAT?' but luckily I remembered where I was. I restrained my voice and in a whisper and strained high pitched voice answered.

“Huh?”

“Oh good! Everyone, she's up!”

It was Feena. She seemed to have already dressed herself; and looking past her, everyone else seemed to have done the same. The dresses, uniforms, were hardly any different from the sleeping gown. The only real difference was the longer sleeves and skirt which reached down to the ankles. With petite utilitarian leather shoes, the three other girls scrambled about their bunks and tucked them in. I thought for a moment I had been shipped off to boot camp. The dreary stone walls of the room gave me that impression.

The attention to detail in making them perfectly presentable without flaws was a little unsettling. Granted, I hadn't yet fully woken up, so everything was unsettling. I had very nearly forgotten where I was when I woke up.

When I tried to pull myself out of the bed, I realized it was a pipe dream to catch up with the girls. I felt forty years older when my joints started popping as I tried to flex and straighten myself out. It wasn't a good pain like a nice stretch. Feena tried to goad me on to go faster, but I was in too much pain and far too groggy to comply. When the other girls had finished and looked over at Feena helping me out of bed like a good nurse assisting an old man, their expressions became frightened.

The door handle turned suddenly, and the door was violently flung open. Floating silently into the room was a round ball of a woman. She was another one of the abbey's nuns, and her habit seemed to grant her the power to levitate as her bulk seemed to float across the floor effortlessly and without noise. She wasn't nearly as ancient as Sister Scarlet, only just over the hill, but her pudgy face was somehow twice as scary. When our eyes met, I realized she was also four times as strict.

“What is this?” She bellowed, and her flabby jowls danced. “Why is this bed not made?”

The nun somehow managed to squeeze through the door and march right into Feena's and my face. She had locked onto the one thing unlike the others in the room with lightning speed. She didn't care

much for what went right, only what went wrong. Feena was caught between standing to attention while trying to keep me on my feet. She seemed to have a soft heart because she failed to do the former and bravely kept doing the latter.

"L-l-lola is new!" Feena shouted out like she was answering a rhetorical question from a drill sergeant.

"Lola?" The fat nun screamed back.

Her baggy, brown and bloodshot eyes studied me up and down quickly, and thankfully her breathing went from enraged bull to almost normal.

"Lola?" She repeated herself. "Lola. I remember hearing about you. Headmaster Scarlet told me about you. You can expect sympathy from the Good Lord for the long legs and face he graced you with at birth, but you'll only get it from me once. Before the sun rises, we expect you awake. Morning prayers, but before that your bed is to be perfect!"

"Yes Sister Samantha," the four girls answered in unison.

Sister Samantha walked over to the beds made by the other girls and inspected them thoroughly. I think the sour expression on her face was because she was unable to find anything else to fuel her anger. The beds of the other girls were already immaculate and flawless. There wasn't so much as a crease.

"It's a dangerous world out there, girls," The nun said; her yelling voice turning subtlety into a stern lecture. "A world filled with evil. If you want to save your souls from that evil, you need discipline. You need a pure heart. Love your husband. Love your Lord. Your hands and your thoughts must never be idle."

The fat nun walked her way back to the door where she produced a tablet with a piece of parchment on top of it. She read down the lines of runes until she found one she was satisfied with. With a nod and a slight smile that worried me, she took a graphite stylus and ticked it off.

"For you girls and just for your new friend here, I want you to dust the storage shed."

Gloria groaned on reflex but quickly remembered to shut herself up when the hawk eyes of the nun tore into her.

"Oh yeah?" Sister Samantha said sounding a little pissed off now. "Then you can skip morning prayers to get it done. But I want it well done. If it isn't, then you get no breakfast. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sister Samantha," The four girls all said in unison again.

When I failed to do the same, the nun waddled her way back to me. At least now I was able to straighten my back, so this time the woman was a little intimidated when she approached. Perhaps I was

the tallest 'girl' she had ever seen. Years of experience allowed her to rebound quickly enough, and she was staring up at me and bellowing in no time.

"We also show respect for our elders and the Sisters... Miss Lola," She said threateningly.

I struggled to keep my temper. I kept my shoulders pinched inwards to make myself as thin and weak as possible and reluctantly answered with a forced high pitch voice that very nearly cracked.

"Yes, Sister Samantha."

Satisfied, the fat nun turned around and left without another word. After giving the nun enough of a head start, the other girls followed her lead. Heather appeared to be ready to burst into tears from all the stress. She had kept the waterworks on hold like a real trooper, but Feena had to console and pat her head to calm her down. Gloria, likewise, patted her on the back and spouted empty threats to the no longer present Sister Samantha. All of it to calm the delicate girl down and reassure her that people were there to look out for her and protect her.

I seemed secondary now, except to Isabelle. Once again, she was staring at me, studying me. I wanted to look away, but a nervous tic of paranoia kept me gazing back right at her. I squirmed on the spot and acted the part of the shy awkward tall girl. I couldn't figure out what was going in that head beyond those thick glasses, but she eventually turned around and followed the other three. Since I had no idea where this storage shed was, I quickly followed them.

When I emerged from the room, the hallway was populated with a wave of girls of all ages from preschool to junior high. It didn't take more than three seconds for about a dozen pairs of eyes to turn in my direction. The one lone person who stood many heads higher than everyone. Add in the white bonnet and brown dress, which were surprisingly the most colorful things in the building, and saying I stood out was putting it too lightly.

Withering further under all the glares, I desperately searched for and quickly found the four girls heading in the opposite direction from the other girls. When we finally disappeared around the corner and left the building, I noticed there on the other side of the field was a large wooden shed. Inside it was dusty, moldy and overall unpleasant. Rows of tools for gardening and construction, unused furniture, barrels of semi-perishable foodstuffs and tons of other odds and ends with no definitive purpose or explanation lined the shelves and cluttered the floor.

I quickly understood this was a punishment job. There was a certain amount of animosity from the other girls as well. They couldn't completely hide it. It didn't matter if they realized it or not. The worst

part is that if I wasn't mistaken, when those prayers are over, it was breakfast time. Then it was chore time. I don't know how long those prayers last, but to get all this done before then was a tall order. It also had to pass inspection from the drill sergeant.

"Okay everyone!" Feena cheerfully shouted out while she clapped her hands. "Let's get started. We might even beat everyone to the dining hall!"

Her enthusiasm was not met with an equal amount from the other girls. There was even three of them to spread it out among themselves, and they still failed. In the end, that bravado was thrown back at Feena who herself sighed when she was forced to confront reality. The four girls broke off into individuals with their cleaning cloths and water buckets.

I stood there silently and in the corner like a statue. My presence still seemed to be the elephant in the room. Perhaps none of them had the slightest clue on how to deal with this very sudden change in their lives. Sister Scarlet had dropped me off and told them the short version of the story already. Her word appeared to be the law here, second only to The Almighty. Any questions or doubts were reeled back in before they put them out into the open.

It didn't take long for the pangs of guilt to overtake me. I had been standing there and watching the girls work while I was stuck introspecting. If it was just cleaning, then an extra pair of hands could only help. Everyone was in a frenzy to do everything as quick as they could. Everyone but one. Over in the far end of the room, Heather was struggling with a wet cloth that dwarfed her tiny hands. She too was looking back and forth at the other three girls and looked ready to break into tears once again. The same pang of guilt that hit me was dawning on her as well. Everyone was working so hard and she wasn't able to keep up.

There was only so much I could take of it, so I approached her quietly. I took great care in not scaring her. I crouched down behind her so that I would be at eye level with her and called her name.

"Heather?" I said.

She turned around like a frightened rabbit. I realized I had forgotten to change my voice and quickly scrambled to recover.

"You want to help me, Heather? I can't reach aaaaaall the way up," I spoke gently to the skittish and frightened girl in a high pitched voice.

Her eyes were wide open, and her expression reeked of fear. You would think she was facing off against a wolf. I played it as normal as I could so that I wouldn't make it any worse. I simply scooted around to show her my back and hunched over further.

"Come on, get on my shoulders," I said.

Heather was reluctant at first, but time went on, and nothing bad happened. Her curiosity started to get the better of her. After about ten seconds, I heard her pitter patter closer and place her small hands on my back. With a bit of effort, she finally climbed up. With her legs dangling over my chest, I slowly stood upright. She gave out a little yelp of surprise at the sudden change in perspective. Her hand tugged and pulled on my hair through the bonnet, but by the time I was standing tall, she had gone silent.

Instead of whimpers of fear and the hic of crying, there was a sigh of wonder in her voice. Then I was treated to another sound I had yet to hear: a playful giggle.

"Whoa!" Her chipper high strung voice cried out.

She broke out into laughter as she reached up with her hands and touched the smooth wooden planks that made up the shed's roof. In all her short years, never had she thought she'd be able to touch the ceiling like that. The novelty of it didn't wear out for about a minute.

Heather's playful laughter caught the attention of the other girls who were stuck at a halfway point between bewilderment and a smile that couldn't be wiped off your face. Maybe Heather's laughter was that rare a thing?

"Let's get it done, Heather. You tell me where to go!" I said playfully.

The little girl smiled, nodded and agreed with further laughter. I held her feet to my chest with one arm and held up the bucket of water with the other. When she waved it about and called out 'Lola!' I raised it so that she could clean and wet her cloth again. She urgently called out to me to move left, right, forward and back while she wiped down the top shelves all around the shed. She worked so earnestly and with so much energy, that before we realized it, we had already done a full circuit around the shed. There was nothing else high up to clean.

All five of us stopped at about the same time and came to the same realization. None of us were very sure of confident that we had actually finished at all. We milled about inside the shed for another minute before we realized that we actually had done everything.

"So... We go get Sister Samantha?" I asked.

"Can't walk in on prayers," Gloria said gruffly.

"Right," Feena nodded. "We'll go straight to the dining hall."

While everyone broke off again to put away their towels and empty their buckets, I started to crouch down in order for Heather to get off my shoulders when she flung her arms around my head and protested.

"No! Outside! Let's go!" She pouted.

I sighed and stood back upright to giggles behind my head. I had to stoop down low as I stepped through the door and out into the

yard where Heather ood and awed. She waved her arms in the air and looked around at everything from a vantage point she had never experienced before. Feena and the other two girls came up after cleaning up, and we gathered round. I was stunned for a moment, and that was met with a perplexed look from the freckled girl.

"What's wrong Lola?"

So now I wasn't being ignored?

Heather lightly pounded her tiny fists on the top of my head and shouted, "Let's go, Lola! Brekkie! Brekkie!" She chanted.

I guess Heather had a soft spot in the hearts of these girls. If this shy little girl opened up to me, the others couldn't go against that. Gloria did look sullen and jealous though. She did know better than to pout and raise a stink about it though. Even Isabelle couldn't hide a smile behind her thick glasses and bored expression. For the first time I saw that bookworm girl smile genuinely.

So we left the shed behind us in order to report back at this cafeteria in the dormitory. When we got there, there was no one else. The sun was hardly in the sky, so that could only mean one thing: we really had finished quickly.

From a room hidden on the far end of the dining hall a single person emerged. One of the sisters in a white chef like uniform had emerged to see what the minor racket was about. Unlike the other sisters, her face was younger, thinner and also significantly less hostile.

"You girls are here early- Oh?"

She stopped dead in her tracks when she spotted me and the odd sight that was Heather still riding on my shoulders.

Feena spoke up quickly, "She's new. Headmaster Scarlet told us they don't have a room for her yet. She's gonna go through becoming another sister, but she's still a year too young. She's really tall, gruff and scary looking, but she's actually really nice!"

It warmed my heart for her to be so quick in defending me. It also made me feel bad... Also a little worried. These girls and nuns were buying this whole story a little too easily just because Sister Scarlet told it.

"Is that so, Feena?" The chef nun said glowingly. "But what are you girls doing here so early?"

"Had ta clean the storeroom," Gloria said.

"We did it really quick," Isabelle followed up.

"I'd say," the nun said, obviously impressed. "Everyone else is still in prayer. Well, I suppose good work deserves a reward. Since you're here first, you get the choice picks."

That one sentence blew the minds of the four girls more than any other mustering of words could have. They didn't waste much time

standing around with their jaws hanging low though. Heather started kicking back and forth to let her down. I did it quickly because it actually began to hurt. Then she too ran off to catch up with the other girls who were following the nun into the other room. I was a bit perplexed when I followed behind them.

Inside was a basic and primitive kitchen. However, prepared on the tables were meals for several dozen hungry mouths. There was plenty of bubbling fresh porridge, but the prize was in the few luxury items on the menu: slices of fresh bread, soft butter cream, fresh scrambled eggs. What got the attention of the four girls was the side pork. The scent of grease hit me hard, and it was pleasant nostalgic sensation. However, there was obviously not enough to go around for every girl in this abbey.

Today was special for these girls though. With the help of the chef they loaded their plates with not so modest portions and soon we were back in the dining hall with a real feast. There was more porridge than I thought every mouth in this abbey could eat, but the way these girls dug into their breakfast made me think they were starving. The expressions on their faces made me think they had reached nirvana.

After about two minutes, the girls from prayer started to pour from the church. The expressions on their faces were quite priceless when they spotted the five of us with the plates we had. They marched in order to line up for their own meals, but every pair of eyes glared at us as they passed by. There was a strong feeling of resentment, confusion and jealousy. As the new girl, I did my best to lower my profile and shrink myself. I was sitting now, so my height wasn't as obvious. I'd gladly take freedom from feeling like a giraffe in a zoo for just a few minutes.

Eventually the whole dining hall was filled to the brim with chatting girls. The usual reservedness was not present because it seemed that the nuns and their constant supervision was absent. No one was overly loud or obnoxious either. No doubt so they don't attract their attention and intervention. It was rather orderly and wasn't used as an excuse to let loose.

Or so I thought.

The chatting suddenly died down very suddenly. It happened so quickly and in unison that it creeped me out. It didn't take me long to figure out why.

A trio of girls had entered the dining hall. Two girls flanked the one, both who were rather unremarkable. The girl they were escorting though. Even from the center of the dining hall where we were seated, I could tell the girl at the entrance was big. She was fat, round and with a face and build like a pit bull. Ugly if you didn't catch my drift. The way she walked reminded me of a mastiff even more. Her hair was short,

scruffy and ginger orange. The expression on her face was vicious, like a rabid dog. The smell on her was even worse as she got closer... And she was far enough away to walk past me on the other side of the table.

I dared for a moment to think that nothing would come of it, but when from the corner of her eye she spotted the remaining half of the feast in front of us, she stopped in her tracks.

"What's this?" She spat while turning toward our table.

Feena and the other girls went stock-still. There would soon be beads of sweat on their foreheads if they tensed up any harder. We shared a long table with other girls, but they quickly scooted down as far as they could get. A buffer zone quickly formed all around the five of us with the three girls looming over the table. And this girl did loom. The reaction to my height wasn't subtle before, but now I'm starting to get why it didn't start a riot.

"H-hello. Tracy," Feena said weakly toward the pit bull like girl.

"Huh?" Tracy answered rudely in kind.

She leaned in and got her face right up into Feena's personal space, and the poor girl shrunk in response. Even though this Tracy didn't touch her, you'd think she just rolled the girl up into a ball and was ready to toss her into the waste basket.

"Did I say hello, freckle face? I said, 'what's this?'."

Feena was too scared to say anything more. She was a girl built for motivational speeches, not dealing with hostilities. Tracy's search didn't stop there. Her eyes wandered over the other girls until she laid her eyes on Heather who was shaking like a leaf in the wind with tears welling up in her eyes.

"Hey. Heather. Why do ya got so much on your plate? You can't eat all that."

I could feel my upper lip go stiff, nostrils flare and my brow furrow.

"Leave her alone, Tracy!" Gloria shouted and stood up.

Hearing the threat against her hegemony, Tracy slowly turned to face the tomboy. She didn't say anything but did reach out with her fat fingers and pluck a strip of side pork off Heather's plate and stuff it into her mouth. The chewing sounds she made were obnoxious and frankly disgusting. Gloria seemed to pride herself on protecting Heather, so that was enough to set her off.

"I said leave Heather alone!"

The scrappy kid didn't get far. One of her escorts grabbed the girl by her arm and held her back. When she didn't stop thrashing, the second thug grabbed hold of her other arm and held her back in the chair.

“Hey now,” Tracy said while licking the grease off her fingers. “The Almighty says charity and sharing are virtues. Just teaching little Heather a little about em. Ain't that right, Heather? We just getting along.”

Heather didn't respond. She was still shaking with droplets of salty water streaming down her puffy and rosy cheeks.

“I said we just getting along nicely, now. Right?”

Tracy's greasy and now slimy hand roughly clamped down on top of Heather's head and pushed it forward then pulled it back to make her nod in agreement in an exaggerated manner. With her golden locks getting caught in the spaces between her fingers, Heather let out a short stifled yelp of pain as her hair got tugged.

That was enough to set me off.

“Back off, bitch.”

The attention of the whole room turned on me. Once again, I had forgotten to mask my voice. At least I wasn't already the center of attention, so that wasn't what had caught everyone's attention. I didn't catch anyone's attention more than Tracy though. She took her large fatty hand off Heather's little head, but she didn't back off. She circled around the table and approached where I was sitting.

“Haven't seen you, before,” She said as she approached.

Then her face was right in my personal space like it was Feena. The smell coming off of her offended me.

“Why are you trying to get between good friend, huh? You wait your turn.”

If I kept quiet, she'd back away like she did with Feena. I figured out that much. But I was too riled up to listen to reason. But this time I remembered to keep my voice disguised.

“Did I say I wanted to talk? I said 'back off'-”

I turned my head to face her.

“-Bitch.”

Her face somehow managed to show an expression even more indignant than before. She stepped backward into the isle between the tables. The girls sitting at the other table scooted away in a hurry so they were always at least two arms lengths away.

“Get up, ugly,” She demanded.

I ignored her at first.

“I said Get UP... Ugly, get up!” She repeated herself.

I think Feena whispered something about me stopping, but I didn't listen. I swung my legs out from under the table and stood up. I stood fully upright and turned to face Tracy. The change her expression went through was worth the price of admission. I didn't bother to make myself any smaller or tuck my shoulders in either. She knew she was the tallest and biggest girl here, but she only came up to

my sternum. To her credit, Tracy didn't stay deterred for long. She puffed her chest out and approached.

She lashed out and tried to push me. Her fat fingers slammed up against chest, but I only budged a bit. My right shoulder was thrown slightly off center, but I rebounded immediately. My reaction was automatic and instinctual. My arms shot up, my hands connected with her shoulders and I shoved her, hard. It was just one push, but the girl went reeling backwards and off balance. One of her legs kicked up, and she went tumbling over. The girls at the table across from us fled like rats from a sinking ship when her ass hit the back of a chair. The poor thing couldn't take the weight, and the front legs shattered. Without anything to stop her, she continued downward until her butt hit the stone floor, and the back of her head slammed against the edge of the wooden table.

The snap and clonk echoed throughout the dining hall. Everyone looked on horrified. Even the table couldn't stop her, and it was shoved across the floor and gave way when the back of her head pushed it aside. The contents of the table couldn't keep up, and several plates and bowls slid off and onto the girl. In just a few seconds, Tracy was on her back, covered in food with only a concussion to reward her for her troubles.

I felt bad about how good that felt. There was probably not much of a difference in weight class, but she was just a teenage girl. Even if she was a punk.

She was stunned. She floundered and tried to sit back up, but she was too discombobulated to do so. The two goons that were holding Gloria back let go, ran around the table and helped pull Tracy back to her feet. Even then, her eyes were unfocused, and she probably couldn't see anything other than stars. Without a word, and in a hurry, her two friends carried her, limping, out of the dining hall.

I just turned around and sat back down at the table. It was only then I opened my eyes to the stares of every girl in the room. Feena, Gloria, Heather and even Isabelle's expressions were completely dumbfounded. I picked up my fork, speared one of my last strips of fried pork and dropped it down on Heather's plate. I tried to continue eating, but the awkward silence was just too much for me, so I could only stare down at my plate and avoid all the glares hitting me from all around.

“Wow!” A girl's voice shouted out from somewhere else in the hall.

That one voice broke the dam, and soon there was a whole crowd of other girls crowding around me. It was just one big mess of noise as everyone tried asking too many questions and tried to say too many things at once. My sense of reason was having a big 'I told you

so' moment in the back of my head. After a few minutes, everyone got tired of trying to shout over one another. They started to talk just as much among themselves instead of yell into my ear. They spoke about what they had just seen. There were already several exaggerated rumors forming all around about me. But at last I could actually hear the girls sitting around me.

"How did you- Why are you so- When did you get that strong!" Gloria shouted at me with her eyes now shining when she looked at me.

"I uh... Oh dear... Oh my..." Feena blustered with her eyes spinning round and round with swirls in her eyes.

"Is the mean lady gone? She's gone! Lola! Yay!" Heather shouted and threw her arms up into the air.

Her face and eyes were still red; she had wet cheeks and a runny nose, but a huge million watt smile plastered itself on her face complete with several missing baby teeth.

It seemed like a VT day, Victory over Tracy day, but the splash of cold water soon came.

"You're gonna regret that," I heard Isabelle say beside me.

There was only one other person in the room that wasn't celebrating, and it was the bespectacled girl sitting beside me. Her eyes were shut and she was still slowly shoveling food into her mouth, but I swear I heard her speak just then out of the corner of my eye.

Only ten more seconds passed, and the whole hall went quiet again. I loathed to turn my head, but it was my responsibility to do so. Standing at the entrance to the hall were two nuns. They quickly surveyed the scene, and it didn't take them long to spot me. They hovered over in their habits and flanked me on each side.

"Lola. The Headmaster wants to see you. Now," One of them said.

I took a deep breath and left my half unfinished plate. I spied one quick glance at the girls still seated at the table. Feena, Gloria and Heather all had expressions you'd expect on guilty dogs. Isabelle, however, she looked at me with a pained expression. I for some reason expected a 'I told you so' face from her.

Silently and without ceremony the three of us left the hall behind. Flooding into the room after we left were another eight nuns to clean up the mess we left behind.

Not a word was said. The two nuns didn't even look at me again. They simply walked beside me and turned in the right directions that led me back to the Headmaster's office at the back of the church. When they opened the door, and I stepped inside, they closed it shut behind them and vanished. Standing at the window was Sister Scarlet.

"Mr. Laven. Please be seated," She said plainly.

Which was odd because I expected her to sound a bit more upset. I wasn't going to temp fate, so I took the same seat I had sat in only yesterday evening. When I pulled my chair in, the withered old prune finally turned around and took her old seat opposite of me.

"Mr. Laven... Do you recall what it is you told me yesterday?"

"I'm far too old for a lecture-"

"Mr. Laven. Do you recall?" the old nun menaced.

Even I was taken aback by her tone.

"...I said I was going to get to the bottom of the abductions in this-"

"I asked you to let the girls be. Is this your idea of upholding your end of the bargain I gave to you?"

I fired back, "And it seems like you got a rampant case of bullying going on in your orphanage."

"...That is none of your concern-"

"When it happens right in front of me like that? Yeah. It is."

"You have been tasked with protecting my girls from this Sabbath. Not to protect the girls in my abbey from other girls in the abbey."

Instead of responding, I sat there and stewed on the great many obscenities I'd like to throw her way. Sister Scarlet stood up from her chair and hobbled back over to the window. She stared out and watched the morning sun rise between the countless green leaves of that ancient oak for a time before speaking again. She spoke softly, so soft she might have only intended those word for herself.

"I would never allow for her to take things too far."

A switch was flipped inside my head. Two currents connected from her words, and a thought crossed my mind that infuriated me.

Would never allow? And those nuns came running in pretty fast after being so blatantly absent. They also knew exactly who they needed. My eye twitched.

"You knew... This is all part of your 'lesson plan'."

The old nun turned around and tried to stare me down with her cataract ridden hazel eyes. I stood up so fast I knocked my chair over.

"Tracy came running right to you. Because someone actually did something. That wasn't part of the agreement with her, was it?"

"Have you no shame after assaulting a young girl, Mr. Laven?"

"I'm too angry to worry about shame right now, Scarlet. I gave one punk girl a concussion. Once. She got some of her own medicine, and she'll get better.... What you're doing, and have been doing for fifty years, is hurt girls for life."

“I teach girls, Mr. Laven. I am not their mother. When they eventually leave these walls, I will no longer have power over them. That means I can also no longer protect them. I teach them to respect our Lord. Instill them with Virtue. Purity. Chastity. I read them the scriptures. Teach them to read and write. This is merely part of learning how to survive in the larger world outside these walls. To protect them from the wickedness of that world, they must learn to bear the brunt of evil. If they do not, when they leave these walls, they will succumb to it.”

“The only thing you're teaching them is to accept evil!” I yelled back

The old nun had nothing to say in response. But she was not moved in the slightest. Instead, she stared at me as she would any misguided student of hers.

“I do not expect a man to sympathize with the lives girls and women must live.”

“Are we done here?” I asked, losing the last vestiges of my patience.

“We are.”

“Good. I'll be going then.”

I turned halfway around to start leaving when Scarlet's voice called out in a very commanding manner.

“No. You will not.”

I stopped and turned back around.

“What?”

“You are to be confined to the Church,” The old hag said.

“Do you not remember what I said-?”

“Have the Sabbath yet abducted anyone during the daylight hours?” She asked.

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. I had nothing to say.

“As I said: You are to protect my girls from the Sabbath. The Sabbath works at night. During the day, you need not be with them.”

I scrambled, “And this room is well warded with all these relics along with the tree outside. What if they can watch everywhere else? What do you think they'll conclude when they scry one awkward girl going back and forth like no one else? They'd think something is off about-”

“Then perhaps I too shall report to the Grand Cardinal? What else can I say other than the mercenary Laven, a man with monster consorts, seeks to pollute the minds of our children? I am sure that she would object. I have heard of your deeds and rumors. I do not believe most of them. But I have yet to hear any which claim you are a perverted and vicious imp out to corrupt the impressionable minds of

our most vulnerable. I think that is why she decided to seek your help. If not for that..."

I grit my teeth and clenched my fists.

"...Do not leave this room. Food will be brought to you. When curfew is near, you shall be escorted back to the dorm room. You will sleep there, do your business of guarding the girls, then return here before prayers. This will be the arrangement until you leave-"

The head nun stepped away from the window and made her way past me toward the door. As she passed, she had one last thing to say.

"-To which I am glad to hear will be soon."

The door shut behind her, and her footsteps slowly vanished into the distance.

Unable to contain my fury any longer, I roared and slammed my fist into the stone wall next to me. There was a sickening crunch, and books, baubles and the like shook slightly on their shelves. I pulled my arm back and let my fist unravel at my side. It throbbed painfully, but I could still clench my fingers. It was a pain which gave me a sensation of relief compared to the burning bile gathering in my chest.

So I sat there in that room. The hours went by. Scarlet did not return, and the only two brief visitors who broke the monotony were nuns delivering my other two meals. I suppose there really wasn't much of a difference from a prison after all. All I could do was watch the shadows cast by the sun move across the yard and over the furniture of the room.

At last, when the sun had nearly set, two nuns entered the room and told me they would take me back to the dormitory. When the day had nearly become night, the girls had all retreated to their rooms. The whole abbey, everything within its outer walls, was dead. Without life. Even the nuns themselves hardly seemed alive as they escorted me and never said a word.

At last I was standing before the same door I was at twenty-four hours ago. There was less apprehension this time. I only had an empty feeling in my chest. When the door opened then shut behind me, the nuns left. The girls themselves seemed sapped of life and enthusiasm. There was guilt written on each of their faces. Feena had no earnest and encouraging words. Gloria had nothing scrappy or spunky to say. Even the admiration on her face that she directed at me for a brief moment was now gone. Heather looked like she was about to cry as she watched me cross the room. Only Isabelle's expression seemed the same. It was the same expression I couldn't decipher. But I didn't care what she thought now. I could only do what I could. Hopefully that would be nothing, and then I'd be on my way.

I crawled onto the bottom bunk, the lights had yet to be turned

off and everyone was already changed. When the bells chimed outside, Feena quietly and unceremoniously blew out the candle, and the room went dark except for one ray of light from the dusk sun that swept through the darkness.

Once again, I laid there in the semi-darkness, curled up in the fetal position, and tried in vain to sleep. It would feel like more few tedious hours until I fell asleep after just a blink.

When my eyes opened again, they were met with darkness. The last bit of dusk sun through the small window was now only a lucent moonbeam of dreary red.

I sat up on the straw mattresses, and I realized the whole room was lit by a dull red. For a moment, I thought I was in a darkroom except there were no developing photos hanging from the ceiling. A red haze filled the entire room. After I sat upright, once I got over hitting my head on the low bunk-bed above me, I looked down and on the floor were two large rotating red pentagrams.

Blood red pentagrams.

Below, a shimmer and sheen grew in intensity. A low ringing reverberated inside my head, and an orangish-red pentagram like the others formed line by line underneath my own bed. Runes of a language I have never seen before slowly formed within the confines of the pentagram and around it. Before I knew it, I was falling toward the floor. My body seemed to pass through the bed and the floor. I was cast into a shining green tube of what looked like a daemon magic hyperspace. I tumbled end over end, but with the ringing and perhaps nature of the space where sound didn't carry, I couldn't hear my own screams.

After tumbling through the nightmarish zone for what was probably less than ten seconds but felt like eternity, I hit stone. Luckily, I didn't hit it face-first, and the rest of my body hit it so that the force of the fall was spread out and marginalized over my whole body. Even then, it felt like I had only fallen half a meter. What hurt more was when something, or someone, landed on top of me.

She made a grunt when her butt hit my spine, and it was only then I was able to get a good scream of pain out when all the air was pushed out of my lungs.

“L-lola?” The voice called out to me, frightened.

I was able to contain my writhing and screaming in pain to take a glance. Sitting on my back was Isabelle. She was still putting her glasses on her face. Her face was abjectly terrified.

“Waaaaah!” A babyish voice cried nearby.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, or lack thereof, of where we were, I spotted Heather bawling her eyes out. Feena was cradling her and trying to calm her. Gloria was likewise trying to console the child.

This was not isolated either. There were about another two dozen girls from the abbey all around us. All of them were in varying degrees of distress. Some were injured slightly. Some of them were still piled on top of one another in heaps. A few older girls were trying to calm the youngest.

When my eyes finally adjusted, I noticed we were in some kind of cave. The look of the walls and ceiling were definitely natural stone formations. At least it wasn't the work of a mason. Nothing looked water eroded. This was mined out. The only dim source of light were several red pentagrams on the ceiling which were still spinning. They were spinning slowly, and once they eventually stopped, they soon vanished. The whole room went dark, and there were many panicked cries and shrieks. But that too did not last long.

From the far edge of the room, a crack of light escaped from whatever was on the opposite side. A slab of stone opened like a door in the wall. Beyond that, the red light of the blood moon along with an eerie blue flame torch illuminated everything with a purple haze. Standing at the door was something not quite explainable.

A small girl appeared at the new exit. It was she who held the burning blue torch. But she also wore something far too risqué and sensational for a little girl. It was a skin tight suit, red, white and black. She looked like a harlequin, but the suit had too much skin showing around the thighs and armpits, and the fabric around the abdomen and chest was nearly translucent. It very nearly didn't hide anything it was supposed to. A jester's hat sat on top of a head with red and black gradient hair which billowed down to her ankles. It was a red joker from a pack of playing cards. But it soon dawned on me that I wasn't actually looking at a child.

Her hands and feet were completely inhuman. Her hands were uncannily larger than normal. They also looked more like claws and were colored red and black instead of her pinkish hued skin. Her feet were pointed and more like chair legs. They were certainly not human-like at all. But it was the tiny bat-like wings spouting out from her mid back and the spaded devil's tail from her bottom that gave it all away. If that wasn't enough, her red eyes had white star shaped pupils which sat above the ever present and precocious smile on her face.

“Welcome! Welcome!” She rang out in an obnoxious, tooth-rottingly sweet and high-pitched singing voice. “You're all just in time for the greatest show-”

With a pirouette and small little dance toward her frightened and captivated audience, she put on an even brighter smile as she twirled and playfully made her way into the midst of the room.

“-in heaven, hells or earth!”

Chapter 73

The air was stagnant and could be easily mistaken for dead. If it were not for the dancing blue flame, then this chamber would be a crypt instead of a reception hall. A chorus of whimpering frightened children filled the air, so I knew I was not alone in my thoughts. There was a very real fear looming over everyone's head. Not much was dissuading us from assuming we were this room's new permanent residents instead of just visitors. Terror electrified the dead air; but in spite of all that, an overture of one girl's incessant and playful giggling labored to sweep those feelings away.

The wash of eerie red light had finally faded. Blood red pentagrams which had circled above us until now had all faded as their magics were spent. Replacing it was now a sinister and seductive blue. A lone light in the darkness which illuminated the inappropriately dressed little demon as she bounced between the scattered groups of orphans. She was clad like a jester, at least that's what her strange hat conveyed to me. But her skin tight and slightly translucent suit told me the entertainment she promised was far from family friendly. I could only make out so much though. I was flat on my stomach with Isabelle still sitting on my back.

There was one thing which I take away from all this. At least Isabelle hadn't scraped or hurt herself. She fell out of the magic circles shortly after me, and I didn't exactly land very well at all. The good news kept coming because there was no taste of iron in my mouth, and I could still feel my legs. I'm glad I could be of service, but she didn't seem intent on paying me back anytime soon... Such as getting off my back.

Thanks to that, I was having trouble recovering from being winded by the fall, and I couldn't even beg her to give my spine a brief reprieve. Meanwhile, everyone else was busy clinging desperately to one another. For safety I'd assume, but it was all for naught. Our host appeared harmless.

“Come now, little ones!” She said in her sickeningly high pitched voice. “Fret not. You are safe now, and no one shall ever harm or bind you again.”

Once the little demon had trotted on her chair leg like feet into the center of the room, she performed one last pirouette, her long ankle length hair trailing like a cape behind her, before officially addressing her captive audience. She didn't just look harmless; she sounded harmless as well.

“The name is Red. I'm a familiar in my master's service. A pleasure to meet you all this evening!”

The little devil named Red took a deep exaggerated bow.

A familiar. If this fabled Crone is a witch, then having a familiar seems in line. But this isn't a cat, raven or a toad. This is an intelligent human-like life form. But now that I think about it, she does seem artificial. Her legs look more like furniture, and her eyes appear almost inorganic with their odd white star shaped pupils while she has demonic like features elsewhere. In line with monsters, her physical appearance seems like she was molded with care from clay. Even if she looked like a child, I would have to assume she was possibly dangerous. Red stood back suddenly with a big showtime smile on her face and continued.

"You will have to forgive us," the girl said with overbearing sadness. "Believe me when I say we wish there was a better way for us to meet. We had no choice but to pluck you from your beds in the middle of the night. Your guardians and your church refuses to accept any other path than their own."

The very mention of the church seemed to put a subtle and very brief crack in her character. Her teeth gnashed, and contempt dripped from her voice. Yet, just a moment later, she returned to her previous self.

"Come now! Come along!" She sang gaily.

From the center of the room she danced and pranced her way back to the exit which not a soul had dared approach. It was certainly not an escape route, so no one could be blamed for not trying.

"I promise you all it will be the greatest show you've ever seen. Has any soul here seen a show? No? Of course, how many of you poor girls could count the number of times your legs have carried you beyond those walls on your fingers? Walls which were to keep you safe!"

With her inhuman claw-like hands she made air quotations with her fingers in case her sarcasm wasn't coming out thick enough. She didn't allow any pause for it to sink in though; the girl let another chorus of giggles as she skipped her back toward the exit. Like a stewardess, she held out her arm to show the exit. No one moved.

"Come along now. This door will not stay open forever... And I don't know when it will open again."

Her voice was chipper as ever, but there was a serious tone to it. This wasn't a friendly anecdote. What she was giving now was a warning.

An ultimatum.

The girls in the room didn't need any more cajoling. The darkness of the room and the thought of being trapped in that pitch black and claustrophobic place was far more frightening than whatever lay ahead. It was a welcome change of pace for me. As the girls slowly filed out of the room Isabelle got off my back, and I was free. Feena,

Gloria and Heather, all huddled together, lagged behind with the two of us, and thus we were the last to exit the room. The two girls shielded the youngest. Heather was shaking badly, and her delicate nerves appeared to be near the breaking point. They did their best to cradle her head, hold her ears and cover her eyes, but it did little good. The devil girl couldn't take a hint.

"Hurry now. Hurry now!" She shouted gleefully. "We're behind. We'll miss the show!"

Just to keep the girl away, they complied while trying to act as barriers and keep the devil away from Heather. There wasn't any tact in interfering just yet, so I followed behind the three of them. I loomed over them within arms reach so I could spring into action on a moment's notice. As I walked, I noticed something else was off. Isabelle small hand was clinging to my sleeve.

Her eyes seemed so intent yesterday; but in this strange and frightening place, she cast her face downward. She pressed up against me and was cowering, standing next to me and pleading with me to keep her safe. She buried her face into my waist and shied away from everything. I could even hear her whimper softly and tremble ever so slightly. My other hand reached out on its own and patted her head reassuringly. I tousled her black hair till it became scruff and mangy. She responded by pressing her face into my stomach harder. When I withdrew my attention from her, I nearly panicked when I realized how far behind the other three and the devil we were. I had to walk quickly, with Isabelle attached to my hip, in order to leave the room before it was sealed.

As we passed the threshold, the stone door rumbled shut behind us and sealed away the stagnant air. Now that air was dead at last. At least there was no one left inside. Twenty-one prisoners, not including myself, in total. I counted each head as the girls of all ages between the ages of five and fifteen now shivered barefoot in their sleeping gowns. I too was starting to feel the chill. The stone floor was bone chilling, and a breeze flowed down the winding tunnels. Claustrophobia had not abandoned us, but we had traded the muggy stale air for a crisp night breeze. But that alone caused my heart to beat and fill me with hope.

If there was a breeze, that meant there was an exit to the outside world nearby. I desperately searched for the source of the draft, but I had a feeling it would come to me, and I wasn't disappointment. While our group was being herded through the tunnels, I spotted a breach in the tunnel. The whole train stopped but only for a moment. I couldn't quite hear what was being said up front, but the little devil trotted to the front to deal with it. It was then I realized that our troubles had doubled.

We had been corralled to a three-way stop where our train had collided with another group of captives. I recognized some faces, and the dull sleeping gowns gave it away. They were from the abbey. Leading the other children was another familiar, but she was dressed in black and white body suit. It was a nearly identical but also vertically reversed version of Red's. Her hair, short enough that it did not reach her shoulders, was also a curious gradient black that eventually transitioned into gray with white ends. On top of her head was a two pronged jester's hat that had checker mark pattern which sat above her eyes which were also twins of Red's.

"Black!" Red called out with her arms wide open and welcoming. "What a fine gathering of sisters we have today."

"Hehe, that we do Red." Black, the other familiar giggled in response, "Our mistress's spell caught eighteen under my watch and guidance."

The familiar, Black, puffed out her chest and boasted. Red feigned shock and threw herself backward in an exaggerated manner, until she put on a wry smile on her face.

"'Tis a shame. I only managed to catch only just over twenty."

A face of playful and sarcastic shock and dismay slapped itself on Black's face. She put the back of her hand to her forehead and wavered about as if she were about to faint.

"Again, dear sister? You have beaten me once more? Ah, but I did catch a couple bonus extras this time!"

"Those do not count. Remember?" Red said sullenly.

While all the girls watched and shook in terror, the two familiar joined hands and bowed toward the group of girls that was now over three dozen. Their captive audience did not give any ovation in kind.

While she was distracted I fished around for something... anything... but came up dry. It wasn't long until I dug deep enough into my own thoughts that something so minor as a faint ray of red light got my attention. It was a subtle and tiny ray of light which pierced the nearby darkness. A darkness held at bay by a haze of blue torchlight. It was there behind a hole in the wall where the light of the reddish moon flowed in.

That had to be what it was. It was very nearly a full moon outside, so you could see the land for miles around. I could only make out the faint ray of light, so I had to push aside the other girls who were still standing shell shocked in my path. Isabelle didn't let me go anywhere by myself even though she was scared and clung to me the whole way. Feena and the other girls did the same as they crowded around Heather and moved toward the center of the pack. The opening was high up on the wall, but I could see through if I stood on

my toes.

The opening was no larger than a porthole and about my arm's length long. All I could see beyond it was a sheer drop. High above there was nothing but sky, the blood red moon and the stars against the black backdrop of the heavens. Below there were about two hundred meters to the ground below. Anyone unlucky or stupid enough to try climbing down and then slip would most certainly die. If I crushed my shoulders there was a chance I might squeeze through... Or one of the girls could easily slip through, but there's no way any of these girls have the strength or skill to make that climb. If there was anyone here who could do it, it would have to be me.

As I mulled over the possibility, I felt a tug at my waist. Isabelle was looking up at me with pleading eyes. They were eyes that pleaded, 'please don't'. It was a splash of cold water; the chill shook me when I noticed the other three girls also had the same expression on their faces. Even if I didn't get stuck. Even if I didn't get caught right away. Even if I didn't slip and die on the climb down. These girls would be all alone. I was the biggest here, and I had rescued them twice before... They were relying on me now that the stakes had gotten far worse than a missed meal or a bully's beating. I couldn't abandon them now to get help and hope they would be okay when I manage to return. I could only trust the other girls to crack the case and then rescue us in time. Until then, I had to do what I could here.

To do that I would need some kind of plan.

I looked down the tunnel and saw the two familiars were still heavily invested in trying to entertain the other girls and had not yet noticed me. Even after I stood as tall as I could while trying to climb out by the hole in the wall. But that wasn't the plan anymore.

“I need something,” I whispered in my disguised voice to the four girls whom had my full attention. “A handkerchief or something.”

The girls looked among themselves, confused, and then back to me.

“Trust me,” I begged.

Gloria slowly produced a plain white handkerchief from an inside pocket of her gown and slowly handed it up to me. I took one last look at the twin familiars who had yet to look back this way before I snatched the handkerchief. I quickly rubbed it hard against my forehead and soaked up the layers of sweat which had gathered. Then I slipped it up my sleeves and wiped both my armpits dry. The mouths of the four girls all dropped at once. I then took the handkerchief, wadded it up, reached through the hole and tossed it into the wind. It opened back up in mid drop and fluttered away on the breeze.

It wasn't much, but it was something. It was also a long shot, but better than nothing. If Minte's tracking and sense of 'smell' in those

antennae of hers were that good, then maybe, just maybe, it might lead them all in the right direction. If they already figured out the right direction, then it should tell them that they've arrived.

Gloria let slip a little yelp, “Ah!”

Damn. I was so caught up I didn't even think that might have some sort of meaning to the girl. But that didn't seem to concern her now. She quickly threw her hands in front of her mouth to shut herself up. On cue, Red and Black's attention were flung in our direction from the front. All the other girls whose attention had been locked down by the two little devils also flew in our direction. Isabelle clung herself onto me even tighter in response. Red and Black quickly gave up when they noticed there was actually nothing exciting happening.

“Oh, do forgive us,” Red said.

“We must have you bored to tears while we two catch up,” Black apologized as well.

The two girls once more joined hands.

“Perhaps you are hungry?”

“Confused?”

“Anxious?” Red said with a grin while playfully jabbing her free elbow into the chest of a girl who looked ready to faint from fright.

They joined their other hands then pressed against one another chest to chest, cheek to cheek while they spoke to the crowd of girls with a sparkle to their star eyes.

“No matter what ails you, please come with us!”

“We will show you the cure!”

“the Crone, our master, will show you wonders. The wonders of the greatest show you'll ever see!” Black sang.

With their joined hands, they looked ready to dance a tango; but instead, a door blocking the third path opened and revealed a bright light greater than their torchlight.

Beyond the door was what appeared to be a massive cavern. A twisting mess of corridors and large open spaces mined out long ago. Rusty, rotting, broken and abandoned shovels, pickaxes and carts full of rocks dusted the halls and caves. This place had not seen a miner for many decades. I began to wonder if there was anyone left alive that even remembered this hill or mountain mine. If there wasn't, then the reason this place was chosen as their hideout became obvious.

With nowhere to go but forward, the girls followed the lead and cajoling of the two familiars. But none of the girls dared to run. There wasn't just the maze to get lost in that scared them. It wasn't whatever the two familiars could do to them. There was now also a myriad of strange sounds and voices coming from all directions. Giggling of girls, heaving, breathing and high pitched moans, bubbling, steaming and too many other noises to take note of. There was sulfur and many

other strange smells assaulting my senses as well. Some of them were pleasant, and sometimes they were offensive. As we passed through the halls, some doors gave me a brief look into the strange workshops that had been set up here. As we did, the two familiars sang.

"Here you'll see an old perverted and former priest," Red sang. "His book, God and peers all said to him, 'no'!"

Inside was an old gray haired man in a black priest's robe and white collar reclining on a pile of colorful satin pillows. Dropping grapes and holding spilling gold goblets of wine were about eight very cute girls of wildly various descriptions all dressed in nothing more than what might pass as underwear. On each of their heads were massive black witch hats.

"Now a gaggle of girls for his very own feast!" Black said finishing the verse.

The sight left me sick to my stomach, but we were quickly paraded further down the hall.

"And now behind this veil: Seven virgins and a mule!" Black said while quickly lifting up a drape covering an opening in the wall.

Inside was a single very wide bed with seven almost naked boys cowering together on it. Off to the side was a woman, at least what was a woman's torso attached to what looked like a horse missing its head and neck. She was a very motherly looking centaur. She had enormous breasts which were currently exposed. They looked heavy with enormous dark brown areola crowning them. She had short brown hair with streaks that matched the Pinto pattern of her horse body.

But she wasn't a mother figure in the least. She had lust in her eyes as she playfully licked down on the side of her index finger while she stared longingly and erotically at the young boys and tapped her forward left hoof on the stony floor. Beyond them a small audience of young girls hooted and hollered encouragement from what looked like box seats.

Red had slid her way over to the girls near myself, Feena and the others. She playfully jabbed her elbow into a girl's shoulder.

"Keep it cool, keep it cool."

Black quickly let the flap back down, and the two familiars shepherded the girls further into the mine.

One girl seemed to be losing her nerves and was ready to freak out. Her eyes were wide open, and her hands were on the sides of her head. It was as though she was trying to keep herself from popping like a balloon. It didn't take long for Red to come swinging by.

"Are you stressed?"

"Missing home?" Black said coming from the other side.

Red pulled the jester's hat off her head and fished around

inside with her claw. Her arm sunk further than elbow deep inside. It was impossible.

"Are we not content with that?" Black asked.

"Then watch as I pull Vivian from a hat!"

From her hat, Red pulled out what looked like a person just a little shorter than a ruler stick. She was young, kindly and good looking woman. Her head was clothed by a nun's habit, and she even greeted the girl with a kindly smile. It was Saint Vivian, or least it was a small likeness to her. Red held her up to the girl's face while her hand was wrapped around the woman's chest and waist. The cuteness of it all disappeared rather quickly. Red pressed her thumb against something on the small saint's back. The little nun's shoulders and head started to rock back and forth. Another click made her do it faster. One last click and the little nun was literally vibrating with a constant droning hum.

"If you are into that," Black said, mimicking the wry grin and elbow nudge of Red.

The girl was left too confused, shocked and a little horrified to react at all. She couldn't even begin to freak out now. Red shrugged her shoulders when the girl didn't respond and without a care tossed the quivering nun over her shoulder. A tiny little scream echoed down the hall for a bit before it was suddenly silenced by the sound of something breaking against a wall in the distance.

We were led down the tunnel for a little while longer until at last we had reached what looked like our final destination. It was a massive open cavern deep within the mine. There didn't seem to be any exit other than the one we passed through. The ceiling was more than ten meters high and sixty meters by a hundred in width and length. Great pillars of stone supported the roof above while the scattered remains of mining equipment laid scattered about. At the vest center of the room were three long dining tables. But there wasn't a thing on them.

"Before we begin the show-" Red began to say.

"You all must be so hungry," Black finished.

"So have a seat. Please. Any seat. No one will be refused!"

"You have all worked so very hard for so very little."

"Now you never have to work to eat again. With but a thought and flick of the wrist, you too can learn to do even this!"

Snapping the index and thumb of her claw together, the three tables were suddenly covered with a feast. It all winked into existence suddenly and without warning. A moment ago the air was stale; now it was filled with a mouth watering aroma. There was even a pig's head with a fresh apple in it.

All the girls looked on in amazement and cautiously approached the tables. It wasn't long until their weary legs and stomachs led them to pull out the chairs and seat themselves. Feena,

Gloria and even Heather—who was now no longer cowering at the sight of all the food—was drawn toward the feast. I stayed back. Isabelle still clung to me, but her eyes were now big as dinner plates. They told me she wished to join all of them, but her clinging to me had become normal and stopped her from approaching on her own.

Red and Black grabbed hold of the stragglers and pushed them along, pulling out chairs for them and sitting them down. I moved on my own with Isabelle still clutching to my waist. We made our way over to a couple seats next to Feena and the other two girls and sat ourselves down. Even then, Isabelle's chair was close enough so that she didn't have to let go of the brown dress.

Before I knew it, everyone was eating. I didn't even have a chance to stop anyone. There could be nothing good from eating food prepared by anyone here. Even Feena, Gloria and Heather had loaded up their plates and started to dig in.

"That's right! Dig in!" Black shouted.

"No need for prayers. This food is the master's, by the master, from the master. She does not need your thanks. Neither does she want it." Red declared.

"If you wish, you too can learn to do the same!" A childish voice rang loud and clear. "You'll never need to beg, be thankful or work for food ever again."

Everyone stopped eating the moment that voice came in from all directions. The mystery of its origin didn't last for long. The large room, which appeared to have been nearly empty only a moment ago, was now suddenly populated. Around the perimeter of the cavern, higher up on the walls, invisible balconies revealed themselves, and nearly a hundred or so young girls each with black robes and large witch's hat on their head appeared. They all sat together, two to a small round table, and had their own meals freshly prepared. They applauded and cheered at the new arrivals; many of which still had mouths stuffed full of food. The thunderous roar reminded the girls of the danger they were in which they had forgotten briefly.

And they should. Even I could feel the pulsating throb of magic surrounding us.

Appearing out of the stone wall, a large stage materialized out of thin air. Seated at her own massive table with elite looking witches beside her was the one who was very obviously their leader. It didn't take me long to put a name to her. She was the Crone, the leader of the New Moon Sabbath.

I half expected something like the caricature that Chris has scribbled, but I should have known better. The signs had been displayed to me many times on the way here. She didn't have green skin, warts or wrinkled skin and a wretched complexion. She wasn't

old, bony and decrepit. She was the opposite of all those things. The girl with a black witch's hat bigger than all the others was young, and her skin was a healthy, normal and vibrant pinkThe Crone was not a crone; she was a child.

But I wasn't dumb enough to think that was the end of it. She was as much a child as an old book with a new edition, freshly printed.

She didn't look any older than ten. If it were not for the unnatural bright yellow-green hair and red eyes I might have mistaken her for an ordinary child. A pair of green twin-tails sneaked out under the huge hat of hers; a very childish style which clashed with the precocious gleam in her eyes. Even then, there was an innocent air about her and her face. She was like Annie without the ginger curls. Even her smile was disarming, but the pulsating fiery red of her irises were ominous and bristled with magic power. A power that smoldered hot and brightly. A staff with a gnarled wood knot on the end of it also bristled with that same power. The surrounding air appeared to shimmer like a mirage due to the sheer power within it, and it gave me a different kind of chill to look upon it.

the Crone daintily pushed her chair backward, climbed on top of the table and stared down at all the girls below her. When her eyes swept over everyone, I turned my back to her and made myself even smaller than before. In her gaze, there was a certain presence. A pressure. I felt it wash over my back like a powerful stream of water from a high pressure hose.

When it passed, I looked backed and saw her still standing there, prepared to make her speech. She had a large bright red cape around her shoulders that billowed behind her. It was a like a teacher's lab coat far too many sizes big for her. Underneath that was a brown leather jacket with a bright red skirt which was far too short. On each leg, she had mismatched thigh high stockings; one plaid and the other black and white stripes.

“Welcome,” she said then paused to cast her eyes over the gathered girls before her once more. “My sisters. I know you are afraid, but soon, very soon, you will understand that this will be a day you look back upon with joy. This day. This moment. It is here and now that you will know true freedom.”

Before the Crone could say a word more, one witch hurriedly scampered across the balcony toward the center stage. The witches adjacent to the Crone let her pass, so she must be some higher up. It showed from the size of her hat. When she finally came before her, she bowed her head and got down on one knee.

“My mistress! I apologize for interrupting you, but we have dire news.”

the Crone's face flashed annoyance before it shifted to

inquisitive instead. On the floor of the cavern, from the entrance we emerged, a group of six other witches poured in and fanned out around the room. They circled around the tables where all the girls and myself were seated. I kept my head low, but I looked around and watched them.

I had a bad feeling.

From where the first witch ran in, three other young girls quickly strode in and made their way to the Crone. The hats on the two flanking the one were also large, but the girl in the middle had no witch's hat. She had short dirty blonde hair and was wearing what appeared to be a black over-cloak and nothing else underneath. Even her feet were bare. Since she was the odd one out, my eyes locked onto her, and I slowly turned my head to follow her.

While they approached, Red and Black made their way behind the Crone.

"What is the meaning of all this?" Red asked, indignant.

"Do you have the slightest clue how hard we worked to get the mood just right?" Black complained.

"Quiet," the Crone growled.

The two familiars shook and shuddered at her stern word.

When the trio reached the Crone at last, the first one who came running stood back up and spoke.

"Master. This one, a new sister of ours, has something urgent to say."

The girl in the middle looked up and laid her eyes on the Crone. Her eyes welled up, and the waterworks almost let loose at that very moment.

the Crone put a gentle smile on her face, "Come now, new sister of mine. Formality is optional here. Do not hesitate to speak to me."

"Crone, my mistress," the girl said at last, barely able to hold back the choking in her voice. "Among all your new sisters... There is a spy."

What. The. Fuck?

The girl turned around and faced me and all the other girls. I watched it all unfold from over my shoulder, but the girl soon found what she was looking for and pointed in my direction. Even from the distance we were at, I could feel her eyes stare right into my own. My heart sunk immediately, and my blood went cold.

"That one. In the brown. That's not a girl. That one is a man!"

An awkward silence. A few laughs but more gasps than thatThe Crone looked like she believed the girl.

"The one called Lola. He is the one known as Laven!"

There's no one who knows-

I take another look at the girl with the dirty blonde hair. She doesn't look any older than the Crone. She's only a child, and I certainly don't remember her face out of all the girls I saw from the abbey. I don't remember seeing her on the way into The Marches either. So how does she-?

Hazel Eyes. She has Hazel eyes. Two synapses cross in my head, and my heart nearly leaps out of my chest.

"Sister Scarlet?" I mumble to myself.

No. That's impossible.

"Laven?" the Crone says to herself while holding her chin in her hand.

She leaned her head back, rolled her eyes upward and thought on that name for a moment. It was as if she had heard that name before and was trying to find the meaning to it.

"That Laven?" She asked while lowering her gaze back at the girl.

The small Scarlet nodded enthusiastically. Meanwhile, the witches surrounding the table inched closer and closer.

"L-Lola?" Gloria reached out with a shaky voice.

Feena and Heather shared the same expression of disbelief and shock on their faces. The girls at the three tables had many faces. Some shared the same expression, others were afraid; just as many more had traces of disgust. Isabelle still clung to my waist. Her face looked down at the floor, so I couldn't make hers out.

I couldn't stand idly by while danger crept closer; the jig was up. I got out of my chair hard and fast enough that it was flung backwards. When I stood fully upright, there was nothing but gasps from all the witches, and even those circling in closer stopped in their tracks. I grabbed hold of the bonnet atop my head and threw it aside. At last I turned around and faced the Crone directly. Her eyes weighed down on me like a pile of mattresses, but I stood tall and strong. I refused to let my knees shake.

the Crone did not let up on her gaze as she leaned over and wrapped her hand over the scruff of fabric around Red's collar.

"What is the meaning of this?" She said coldly to the familiar.

The familiar looked left and right in confusion, "Meaning of what?"

the Crone yanked hard on Red's body suit and dragged her right into her waiting cold red eyes which burrowed into the little devil girl.

"How did you let this man in? Was my spell not perfect? I said no hang ups this time!"

“W-what... Ma.... Ma....Man? W-who?” Red coughed.

the Crone looked back at me, then toward Black who was standing terrified and at attention next to Red who was gasping for airThe Crone's grip tightened, and Red's taut collar choked her. Her wings beat back and forth to no effect, and her spaded devil's tail snaked and writhed in pain behind her. Black also had a face of pure confusion. She looked in the same direction the Crone was but did not notice me. It was as if I was invisible to her.

“E-eighteen with t-two more. Twenty-one w-with Red,” Black stuttered.

“Twenty-three,” the Crone said.

She let Red go, so that her knees could buckle. Red fell on top of her chair-leg like legs and coughed uncontrollablyThe Crone paid her no mind, and Black quickly swooped down to help her sister up and out while their master was not paying attention.

“I see some stories I've heard were not exaggerations. To think, you somehow managed to outsmart even me... Yet I did not expect to see you so far west. To whom do I owe the pleasure?... Mr. Laven.”

The smile she gave caused me to clench my hands into fists. It took everything I had just to stand and keep my knees from shaking under her fiery red and magical eyes. They were brimming with all sorts of intent I dared not begin imagining.

Chapter 74

From every direction, off the stone walls, the hushed whispers and giggles of witches masquerading as preteens echoed. I stood tall at the center of the coliseum floor, the only adult around and the last line of defense for all the kidnapped girls from the abbey orphanage. On the balcony spanning above me, the witches in their over sized hats, black robes and inappropriate clothing watched the spectacle unfold. Dinner time entertainment would be my last stand. Lording over everything was the witch with the biggest hat of them all. She radiated more magic than I had ever felt before. Her green twin tails peeking out from under her hat danced as if there was a strong wind, but it was only the pressure her magical aura gave off. A pair of red precocious eyes belied her youthful appearance by smoldering with ill intent.

the Crone patted the head of a girl kneeling before her in awe. I still couldn't believe my own wild thoughts about this girl, who she was and how she knew who I was. She cooed and wept tears of happiness as the elder witch ruffled her hair and caressed her cheeks like an owner would their dog. She could not comfort the girl forever, not with her unexpected guest to entertainThe Crone left the young girl wanting more and leaped on top of her dining table. With her legs shoulder width apart and her hands on her hips, she threw her mischievous grin, sinister leer and taunting words down to me.

“I could ask my new and dear little sister, but where would the fun in that be?”

A corner of her mouth curled upward and bared her teeth as if she could not contain herselfThe Crone's red eyes burned brighter, and I thought that flames might burst from them at any moment. But after staring expectantly at me for another few seconds, the smile wiped clean off her face. She was left with an expression of bemusement.

“Hmm? How strange. I throw everything at you, but you do nothing more than shudder.”

The rapidity of my heart rate was already unhealthy, my forehead was drenched in sweat and my neck was sore from trying to keep an eye on the six other witches surrounding me from a distance on the coliseum floor. What I had not noticed, until the Crone spoke, was that my hands were noticeably shaking. No matter how long I stared at them or tried to calm myself down, they refused to stay still.

“Fascinating. I've only ever met a handful of mortals, mere humans, who were as composed when I got serious. Each one was a more impressive specimen than you.”

the Crone's backhanded praise only irritated me further.

“Fear to submission. Submission to acceptance. You need

to break down old walls to build new ones. How tragic. To think you are built on such rotten and crumbling pillars, yet they refuse to be toppled. Is your stubbornness the stuff of legends?..."

Her eyes opened wide, as did her smile when her mouth opened wide with excitement.

"...Or is it a curse?"

She let out a bone chilling cackle, and all her witches did the same. It was a bone chilling sound, and it was the kind of thing I had expected when I heard that I would be delving into a den of witches. But that reminded me how I got here, and what I had to do. I clenched my shaky hands into fists. There would be nothing to gain, and I would only lose my ground if I continued to do nothing.

"Let these girls go, Crone."

I could barely say it without my own voice croaking. My throat was parched, and it was probably barely audible at all. The whole cavern went silent immediately. A hundred eyes bore down on me.

"Go where?" the Crone snapped back at me. "Away from here?" Her voice turned from furious to playfully sarcastic. "Back to the abbey? No. That won't happen. I will allow no such thing until they have been enlightened."

I didn't think such a pleasant word could be made to sound so frighteningly cruel.

"They will taste freedom, and after that they will never want to return. If they wish to leave this place, then I will not stop them, but that never happens."

My eyes turned to the girl still kneeling at the Crone's feet.

"I saw it in your eyes right away, Laven," She said with empty praise. "Yet you don't want to believe it. You truly are very stubborn."

She turned her eyes down to the girl at her feet. She slipped off one leather boot with the other.

"Be a dear, child." She said to the girl.

The girl with the dirty blonde hair reacted immediately and worked her small nimble hands on the stocking clad foot to massage it.

"Our lives- ah- bear fruit, Mr. Laven." She said between pleasant coos while her tender underfoot was caressed. "We grow -oh- as big and strong as able -ah- and one day hope it bears something sweet. But no matter how big or small, it ends all the same.

Without being asked, the girl removed the other leather boot, switched over to that foot and kneaded it.

"Sometimes -oh- it is plucked before its time, but ripe fruit -ah- falls eventually. It falls into the waiting maw of death. It's an inevitability everyone must face... But I... We... Are not everyone -ah. There are other waiting hands to fall into. I am one of those waiting

hands. Kinder than death, I offer an alternative."

She pulled her foot away and frolicky shooed the girl away with her foot. The girl reluctantly complied and pulled away with a sad look on her faceThe Crone's eyes turned back onto me with another wide grin on her face.

"And just like you'd expect.... Rotten fruit always falls. Ooooh, how I wish she hadn't given it all away so easily. The look on your face as it slowly dawns upon you would be so much better! But how long can you keep it up? Why don't you tell all your friends? They all look so confused... Or should I?"

I didn't just need that. Before the Crone got to the point, I spoke out loud what I had been mulling over in my head.

"...Sister Scarlet."

All the abbey girls cowering in and behind their seats under the dinning tables and behind me gasped. Even before she spoke, without the wrinkles and sunken sockets, I recognized those hazel eyes right away. It was immediate. I didn't want to believe it, but here she is. How else could she have known? No one other than her, Rose and the othersThe Crone's beating around the bush only reinforced that conclusion. She didn't look like she was in the mood for playing games. There was something sinister about her, but it wasn't because she was deceitful or a liar. She meant every word that came out of her mouth. That was just as frightening as a good liar.

"A promise of eternal youth does strange things to people, doesn't it? Who wants to grow old and die? Who wouldn't avoid it if they could, even after everything they've done and believed in during their short life?" the Crone cackled. "Yes! Eternal youth, that is but the start of what I have to offer you all today."

the Crone threw her arms up into the air and shouted to the heavens as she preached to the abbey girls. Dozens of hands applauded and cheered her from the balcony. She clenched her fists in the air and looked back down at all the frightened girls with a smile.

"You'll never grow old. You'll stay as you are until the end. Unchanged and perfect. Your skin will never sag. Your body will never ache and grow frail. You'll never have to throw away old clothes because you outgrew them. You will all be cute forever!"

the Crone lowered her arms and pointed at me.

"But they'll never allow that! When you are a child, you are useless to them. Just another mouth to feed. A hole to shut up so they can cram its head full of their ideas. When you grow up, you're just another back to break. Another womb to fill. When you're old, you are just another poor and senile soul to shut away from the world. Shut away until the day you leave it. Someone might cry for you, remember you, but they will move on. Time will move on. Then time will forget

them just as it did with you. Everyone who bothered to care for you will leave someday too."

Her witches watched her deeply moved; the abbey girls stopped shaking and cowering to hear her. I stood there and grit my teeth.

"I say no to all that!" the Crone roared. "Such a life is cruel! It is something I will never accept. The gods are too cruel. They gift us with something so precious, then make it wither away. Then they take it back from you. They take it and expect you to show gratitude that you were lucky enough to have been given something broken. So I will break their rules just as they sought to break us!"

There was no way I could stand there and let her continue unchecked.

"Who do you think you are screaming and yelling at scared children? You yanked them from their bed and homes to fill their heads with ideas. Your ideas. You say you're against all that; you're just as guilty!"

"Laven, Laven, Laven," the Crone said, shaking her head pitifully. "Only those without sin can throw stones. You have to make a blind woman see if you want to tell her how beautiful a sunrise is. Or maybe she doesn't want to see? Is that what you're saying? Why would a slave ever want her chains broken? She's still alive. Isn't she? That's all she knows. Isn't it? But when she's free, truly free, she'll never want chains around her ever again. Am I mistaken, Mr. Laven?"

Before I could open my mouth to respond, she continued.

"I am not one of your saints!" She declared to the girls, her eyes studying each girl. "I am eternal, but I am not a god. I am not perfect. I took you from your home. I brought you here against your will. I kidnapped you, and even now you are all very scared. But that is only for a moment. Soon, very soon, I will offer you a new life. A life beyond your imagination. Beyond the walls of your abbey. The world is so much bigger than that rundown little pile of rubble. There is so much more to learn than your prayers. So many more possibilities than what you've been given."

I wasn't going to stand being ignored for long. I tried to step forward, but something stopped me. Someone stopped me. Isabelle was still clinging to me. She wasn't just holding onto the dress now; she had her arms wrapped around me and her face buried into my stomach. I hadn't even noticed. The pressure from the witch made my whole body feel numb. With all her might Isabelle kept me on the spot. It was as if she was begging me not to do anything stupid. I complied and instead I yelled back at the rambling Crone.

"Leave the girls out of this! If you want to gush your philosophy to someone, do it with someone who can fight back. Pick

on someone your own size!”

Okay. That came out rather dumb considering the circumstances... But it got the response I was looking forThe Crone was not taking kindly to my repeated interruptions, and her ire once again focused in on me. Her fiery gaze leveled onto me, but this time I was prepared and kept the shakes at bay.

“You never did answer my first question, did you?” She menaced. “To whom do I owe the pleasure? That was it. It wouldn't be Sister Scarlet here-” She looked back down at the girl near her feet who got flustered and shy from the attention. “-right?”

Scarlet shook her head.

“Yes. Scarlet here, the old Scarlet, would never agree to something so outrageous. A grown man in girl's clothing sleeping together in the same room as poor and vulnerable little orphaned girls. There is no way any virtuous and law abiding follower of the Almighty would allow it... I would... An odd priest or two would cry out against it, but wish to do it themselves... But never the old Sister Scarlet. No. You got authority from someone much higher... And here I thought she had given up. After hounding me for so long. I have to confess; it was starting to get annoying. Just when I think I'm in the clear, you show up. And what a marvelous and unexpected stunt you pulled.”

the Crone's playful face and tone vanished in an instant.

“But why would you do it?”

The shift in atmosphere caught me off guard and caused my heart to skip a beat. Her eyes weren't just tearing into me with her magic; there was a guilt infested glare that ripped into my conscious.

“What would you have to gain? I've heard the Church is very cross with you and what you've been up to. Why would you agree to work with them now? But the answer is very simple, isn't it?”

I took a breath to respond, but she raised her voice, which startled me, and she screamed back.

“No! You are not here to protect these girls. You never were. You're here for me!”

I seethed and ground my teeth together harder.

“Don't mess with me, Laven.” the Crone raged. “Do you expect me to believe that Grand Cardinal Ulmpher cares for the little girls of The Marches? Do you expect me to believe that anyone cares for the little ones of The Marches? Everyone here is out to hurt little girls. Use little girls. Everyone but me!”

That's not how it's-

“No, Laven! You'll listen to me now... Aren't you tired of playing the hero?”

That was like a dagger to my heart. My jaw slackened, and my body tensed up.

“You leave chaos in your wake. You did not save Brun nor anyone in it; the only thing you left behind was death and bedlam. You left Vilmheim teetering on a crisis. You purged the strong arm of one faction, unbalanced the powers that were, and then disgraced a very odd but important man holding half of that kingdom together... You marched into Domdracveria and ended a civil war by placing a dragon on the throne. That's a princess whose greed will soon outstrip her mercy. She'll claim old ancestral lands beyond those mountains to add more gold to her horde. But that doesn't concern you, does it? You'd be the one man in all the world who would get by unscathed from her fury, wouldn't you? Frail Vilmheim will certainly not be... Some would argue, but most know that you didn't intend to gut the Northern Imperial Highway. The one who sunk that ship was a Silver Bannerman traitor... But you created the pandemonium which let him get away with it. The Church's fanatical desire to shut you down destroyed a bridge. An important bridge that will end up choking the whole North now that it is gone. All that, just to keep you from going any further south. Because who knows what ruin you'll bring when you pass through the heart of the Empire to wherever you're going. You are not a hero, Mr. Laven. And I will not let you take these girls away from me so you can pretend you still are. So that you can wash away all your guilt because I know that you know everything you've done.”

I stood. Speechless. My breathing began to hyperventilate. My eyes were wide open. My heartbeat quickened and felt irregular. Painful.

“Where will you take these girls? Back to the abbey? What good will that do? They have already been here. Steeped in magic and powers you cannot even feel. All that is needed is a spark to light it on fire. Burning away their old lives. The Church will know that when they return. They won't be trusted. Even if they were, do you think there will ever be open arms waiting for them? Do you seriously believe that girls are adopted from that place?... No, they never are. Girls are an excess right now. No one wants them. That is why they are in the abbey to begin with. In old times, the previous era, when there was no war, there was a man for every woman. After the new Demon Lord came, and the monsters freed, there are at worst three men for every five women. Those missing men have now found happier homes... Maybe, just maybe, if these girls are born special with latent talents for magic, then maybe the Church or Bannermen might take them. Without that they will be nothing. Someone languishing in a social home. Maybe a man's docile wife if she's lucky. Nothing until the day they die. You won't save them by taking them away from here. You'll doom them. You haven't saved anything or anyone. I don't expect you to save these girls now. But you never intended to. You just want to shove

them away somewhere. Somewhere you deem right. And to think, you come here and accuse me of wickedness."

There was a ringing in my ears now. I could hardly hear anything anymore. A whiteout creeping over my vision was making it difficult for me to see anything anymore.

"Sit down Laven. Sit down, and I will show you a better world. A world where you will see each of these girls smiling. They'll never age. No one will ever push them around or tell them what to do. Magic will flow through them. They will never go hungry. The might of magic in their blood and bones will let them overcome any challenge life throws at them. They will never need to feel shame again. Shame for the body they were born with. Drown all the pleasure they could feel with prayer. They will never need to pray away those gifts ever again."

I stood there, my knees weak... I really did all that damage didn't I? I just wanted to go home. Everything kept getting in my way. Anything that wouldn't help me, aid me, I discarded. I was sent here to bring the Crone to the Grand Cardinal. In return, she'd get me passage to the Free Ports. I wouldn't have to struggle or risk my life any further. A free pass that I wouldn't have to bleed for... That none of those girls foolish enough to see something, anything, in me to bleed for.

My eyes looked around at all the girls, shaking, cowering, some already with eyes full of gleam. Some of them have nearly bought what the Crone is selling them. And why wouldn't they? If everything the Crone says is true, and there is little that possibly could be false, then their lives would only get better. None of the girls were looking at me anymore. No one but Feena, Gloria and Heather. All three of them were huddled together, all staring at me. There was no disgust on their face. There should be. There was no fear in their face, and that was because of me. I expected it. They were looking at me with expectation. What was I going to say? What would I do?..The Crone was right; I just cooked up the idea of saving these girls for myself... But I still can.

I flexed and clenched hands into fists once more. I looked back up at victorious looking Crone.

"So sure of yourself, aren't you?" I said.

the Crone frowned. She wasn't expecting any further resistance, and she could hear it in my voice now.

"So self righteous. Your fat head has gotten so big that it has become impenetrable to any thought that isn't your own. You're so happy and content. Why would anyone not want what you have? If they don't want it, then you can force it on them. That's how you feel, isn't it?... I'm no saint either. I might not be able to save these girls... But I can at least save them from you. Because in the end, you're

nothing more than another Tracy."

That name drop got the attention of all the girls from the abbey.

"You are nothing but a bully. A bigger, scarier and more powerful bully, but a bully nonetheless. You offer protection... Protection from you. If it can't go your way, you'll force it your way. So yeah, I might be forcing these girls back to where they came. Where they came from might not be any better than here... But I saw those girls smiling there. I don't see them smiling now... So no, I won't sit down... Let these girls go. They have the right to decide that without you."

the Crone continued to frown. Then she raised her hands and clapped loudly, once. Sparks of red fire erupted from between her hands, and the sound of it caused the girls and myself to flinch. The brightness of the light blinded me for a moment, but that bit of light in the darkness was nothing compared to the light that poured in next. The whole mountain felt like it was rumbling. From high above, a red light shone into the cavern. The stone ceiling opened up like a sunroof, and an opening the size of house's roof gave way. High above, a nearly full red moon shined.

"I'm sad we couldn't come to terms, Mr. Laven. You truly are a stubborn man. Stubborn, blind, small minded and stupid. But that doesn't change anything at all... Except your place in what comes next."

As the mountain rumbled, the witches cackled, cheered, chanted and started drawing lines of red light which hung in the air. The girls clung to one another and cowered all around me. Feena and the other girls leaped onto me and joined Isabelle in clinging to me. They huddled around me, and I put my hands on their shoulders and heads in reassurance.

"I would love to go on, Mr. Laven, but I'm on a tight schedule. This red moon will not last forever. Before tomorrow night, when it shines full and red and before it turns gray then fades away, I must make my final preparation. Everything else is ready, and there is nothing you can do to prevent it."

"I said-!" I yelled back against the rumbling.

"Let them go? There will be nowhere you can take them to get away from me after this! From this place to the entirety of The Marches, I will spread my fountain of youth!"

What?

"The Marches was once one of the four places in the Old Empire where the Imperial Army resided. From these plains, they grew and reared their horses and food. From these hills, they mined iron for their weapons and armor... How so? A wondrous feat by mere mortals irrigated the entirety of these wastelands, and it is all still connected to

this day... Even if they don't realize it. I will put a taint, my taint, into the underground rivers and lakes that span The Marches. Everything that drinks from it, grows from it, will be granted eternal youth! I suffered long centuries, over a millennium! I spent countless years as a venerable old woman. I made pacts with nefarious otherworldly forces to kept my mortal form. I gained powerful magics that cause mortals to quake in fear at my very presence... Even as my eyes became milky white, my hair thinned, my skin sagged and my bones become brittle, I endured. I sacrificed the lives of many so that I might keep mine. Then that all changed. I served as an agent under the previous Demon Lord, his bloody warpath. I survived the purges when he fell, and the mortal humans swept over the lands to reclaim them and slaughtered all monsters and their allies. I survived until the day the new Demon Lord, in all her wondrous splendor and wisdom, made me anew! I was granted with eternal youth, and I no longer had to sacrifice everything! I will give back more than I ever took. Now I can grant this power, this gift, this happiness to all... For my Lady, I will see it done!"

Floating in the air between the Crone and me, a red pentagram and a series of magical bars formed. It looked like a cageThe Crone leaped from the table, and I watched as she pranced through the air. A luminescent red panel formed under her feet as she stepped barefooted down a series of steps toward the magical contraption.

"All I need now is power from my old master. With my old master's assistance and the red moon, I will make the whole of The Marches my domain. Every girl and woman a witch. Every man will fall madly in love with them. It will be an everlasting paradise!"

There's no way I could let that happen. Rose, Susan, Chris and Minte... Myself... All these girls and everyone living in the Marches, good and bad... There's no way I'd get anywhere if that happened.

"Crone! Stop it!" I yelled while shielding the girls crowded around me from the winds and currents of magic swirling around.

"Laven-" She responded immediately.

I didn't expect her to be paying attention from how rapt she looked right now while looking into the pentagram spinning before her.

"-If only you had seen the light. I would have allowed you to keep on protecting these girls you pretend to care for so much... But that might make their real protector jealous. Our protector."

What is she talking about-

"Bring Montée! Now!" She screamed.

One of the witches not tied up with casting the spells spoke up, "Montée is asleep, my lady."

"Well, you better go wake him up then," the Crone growled back.

I watched as the witch went rigid with fright and then ran off. A

new door in the stone wall opened up to let her pass then closed again when she ran through it. I looked back at the Crone as she stared at me with a wild eyed expression. Then she waved her hand at the wall which once held the door which had led us in here. With just that wave of her hand, the door once more opened up. An escape route at last.

"So you fancy yourself a protector, do you Laven?" the Crone said, mocking me. "Then let us see you prove it."

From the wall below the balcony where the Crone once stood, another doorway opened in the solid rock. As it rumbled open, the witches surrounding us murmured between their chanting. The witches that were surrounding us backed off to the balconies. There was now nothing to stop us from making a run for it... But none of the girls moved... They couldn't move. It might be a spell keeping them in place, but it could also be what emerged from the new doorway.

Something resembling a man come forward. To say it was a man would be false. It was something that was once a man, but no longer. The door that opened was about three meters tall, the man that emerged from that had to stoop low so he wouldn't hit his head... And it was a man, the bulky and hideous frame gave it away. It was built like a tank. Muscles bulged and grew on him in unhealthy ways. It looked like a giant bipedal mound of flesh. A clump of flesh in the vague shape of a man that was held together with straps. It wore nothing but belts. Belts covered his arms, torso, arms, neck and even head. It was a body suit made up of countless individual brown and black leather belts. Only space around his eyes, mouth, feet and one hand were visible at all. His left arm was tied up completely, like a big black and useless board.

The creature's eyes were milk white, but I saw them look around as though they could see perfectly fine. His mouth was constantly gaping open with drool pouring from it. His face—what I could see of it—was frozen in a perpetual case of dumb. When he spotted the girls though, the smile on his face made me sick to my stomach. He walked closer; the earth rumbling with every heavy footfall. This guy could weigh more than a ton.

"Laven... Meet our Big Brother Montgomery," the Crone said pleasantly as she introduced the beast.

"Monteeeeeeee~!" The giant of an oaf replied in a deep gruff and stupid voice that shook the earth.

He didn't seem capable of even saying his own name. Hence, his nickname.

"He doesn't talk much now," the witch said wistfully. "You see, he was much like you once. Except instead of rejecting magic, his body was really good at conducting it. Really good. But one day, he lost his dear younger sister. He couldn't protect her, so he vowed to

get stronger. He would stop such a thing from happening again. To anyone. So, he got stronger, but he could only get so strong..."

the Crone stepped down from her magics to float behind the giant's shoulder where she patted his head. The thing responded in kind by rubbing his head against her hand like another dog.

"Until we met one day. He wanted to get stronger, so I made him a special belt and special potions. Elixirs that made him really strong, for a time. The belt made him a bit stronger so long as he wore it... But it was never enough for our big brother Montgomery here. So I made him more belts. I brewed up more potions. But even then, it was not enough... Time went by, and he got so many belts and drank so much potion, that he got this big. He lost his mind to it, the silly oaf, but he's happy now.... Aren't you, you silly billy you?"

She talked to him in a voice like you would a baby, and he loved it when she pets his head.

"Montée loves all his little sisters. And he wants to keep them all safe. He'd do anything to protect them. He's already proven it, just look at him! Look at what he gave up to be what he always wanted to be! Can you, Laven, say the same?"

I tore my eyes off the pant soiling sight of the giant and glared furiously at the Crone.

"You're fucked up," I spat. "I knew it."

"If you wish to stop me and save these girls... Then you can do it over his dead body. Or you can run. Run fast and far away. Save your skin. The exit is right there," She said while pointing to the hole in the wall far behind me. "Montée, if the bad man runs, let him. If he takes so much as a step forward... Kill the bad man."

"kIlL! bAD! MaaaaaaN!" Montée struggled to say.

I could see it hurt his brain to even say those simple words. His whole body twitched while he tried to stumble the words out of his mouth. With most of the girls still in my arms, I pushed them all behind me.

"Go!" I yelled.

They were shocked for a moment, almost all of them tripped and stumbled.

"Run!" I said while pointing to the exit.

The three of them didn't need to be told a second time, but as they ran, they quickly froze to the spot only a few strides away. They didn't even clear the dining tables in the center of the room. Isabelle hadn't even moved; she was still clinging to me and in mortal danger..The Crone cackled.

"That exit is only for you, Laven. Not for any of these girls. If you want to save any of them. You'll have to beat Montée here. That's the deal. No other options. No take backs. I have more than enough

power for this next part. I WILL show these girls wonders... And then when I am prepared for the final spell, I shall take their life force, their mana, then they will be free. As witches, I will bring that freedom to them and then everyone!"

I was standing a ways away from Montée, but his size and reach was so great; he could take a couple steps and grab my head almost immediately. His one hand was bigger than my head, so it would be no harder than squishing a plum. So I stood there, paralyzed with fear. The behemoth of a man stared at me and breathed heavily. His hot air and bad breath made me feel ill... I was already feeling ill enough due to sheer terrorThe Crone, meanwhile, skipped her way back up to her pentagram to continue her spell.

"Hear me now!" She shouted.

The pentagram spun faster, and the bars of lighting around it begun to form a cage.

"Old Master! Duke from the third hell! Your servant, the Crone, calls upon you now!"

The pentagram began to burn brightly like a miniature sun. Looking directly at it seemed like it could cause blindness. I had to shield my eyes.

"Awake from your slumber! Walk the land of the living, the mortals, the material!"

The air itself seemed to tremble. What she said next I couldn't understand. Her childish and sweet voice began to sound... demonic. It was deep and unnatural. It was as if something foreign began to speak through her. Something that sounded far larger than could be contained inside her tiny frame. It was all in a language that I couldn't even begin to decipher. I wasn't sure I could even make my tongue do the same gymnastics to repeat her. They were words of power. Demonic power. So this was the kind of ritual mentioned to me before. The kind of thing that summons demons from hell. Near the end of her chant, the words coming out of her mouth gradually transformed back into something I could understand. Yet, her voice still had a hint of some otherworldly being. It spoke almost silently and just loud enough beside her own voice. Both rumbled with power.

"Come... Ba'el!... Appear before us now!"

The red pentagram with terrible runes of power shattered and exploded in all directions. Its light passed through living things harmlessly and disappeared beyond the stone walls. The red bars of light snapped and clanged together in a complete cage, letting off a shrill cry like striking irons. With hands raised high in the air, the Crone looked on with expectant eyes but was quickly disappointment. The pentagram was gone, the cage remained, but it was empty. Her face quickly turned ugly and was overcome with fury. The witches all

around the room cowered at the change. She was angry but silent and calm enough to think for a moment. After that moment, she stared right at me with eyes now literally burning with magical red flame.

"Was this part of your plan too!" She yelled at me and pointed.

I hadn't the slighting clue what-

"You sought to stay close, hidden, and interfere with my magics till your friends arrived?"

That... actually wouldn't be a bad plan... I think I was doing something like that before I got overwhelmed by everything.

"Everyone, prepare it again! You have ten minutes! And you..." She threatened while staring at me. "Montée... Dispose of him. I am done with these games. I will not have his very presence hinder me any longer... Save those poor girls from the bad bad man!"

"MONTEEEEEEEE!"

The big stupid gorilla of a man roared while thumping his one good arm against his chest. He spat giant gobs of spit as he screamed.

"...Do not harm his brain, heart or loins... I do not need the rest, so break it any way you get joy out of." the Crone smiled one last smile at me while still speaking to the giant. "To save your new sisters. I am sure after they are reborn with sturdier and more magic forms, some will play with you."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight. The sense of terror that had overcome me was now replaced with anger, but there was nothing I could do. One footstep forward from the beast shook the earth enough to nearly put me off balance. He reached out with one hand toward me. Once that grabbed me, I'd be dead. If it lightly tapped me, it would shatter bones. Every bone in my body was like a toothpick to him. He took another step, and his hand got closer. I closed my eyes, and I understood what it felt like to be on the other side of a firing squad. No one wants to see their death coming. I could feel the body heat radiating off it... But it didn't come.

I felt something pull back. It was so massive I could tell where it was without looking. A whoosh that predicted something big brushed over me like a sudden breeze. Something big was coming. Something which displaced a massive amount of air very quickly as it approached.

Rip!

"MON-

Crunch!

"-tee?"

I heard a crunch alright. But it wasn't around my head or chest. I heard it in front of me. I opened my eyes and saw the giant hand was still there in the shape of a fist, but there was something else too.

There was a small hand latched onto the metacarpus of his middle finger. It was fuzzy, silver white with streaks of brown. Three fingers and a thumb, each with a sharp claw at the end.

"Crone, Crone, Crone..." A high pitched child's voice said nearby. "What did I always tell you? Semantics, Semantics, Semantics."

Something very strong pushed me. It happened so quick, and it was so strong, that I hit the ground two meters behind me. I tried to sit upright, but I could only look over my own chest after my backside took a sudden blow like that. There I saw someone tiny... Standing up to the giant. She had one arm stretched out with a claw dug into his fist. An inhuman hand which was furry till the elbow where the thin and spindly girly armed resumed. The air pressure from the blast before had blown apart whatever she was wearing. I quickly looked away since there wasn't anything covering her bare bottom anymore... Only scraps of it remained.

"What?-" the Crone gasped looking down at the events unfolding.

"-the hell?" I said, finishing her thought.

"Not a bad guess!" The girl responded jovially.

Black hair, that tall and- She looked over her shoulder and down at me with a grin. A very long and sharp little pearl white cuspid peeked out and bit down on her lower lip... She had green eyes with rectangular black pupils... She looked similar—but not quite like—Isabelle!

She looked back at the giant and her own hand, "Ah, dammit... Do you know for how long and hard I worked on this disguise?... Oh well, here we go!"

Parts of Isabelle shed off her, floated away as particles of light and then winked out of existence. Her free arm from the elbow down transformed in the same way as the other. Isabelle's legs did the same from the knees down; the fur was even thicker and shaggier than that on her arms. Her feet underwent an even wilder transformation. Her little human feet transformed into little trotter hooves... Like the devil's... As if that was not enough, from her head two objects of light formed. They were massive, forty centimeters or possibly longer. They were thick and heavy looking curved horns, as thick as her arms. When they had grown as long as they could, the light shed off, and the goat-like beige horns that curved slightly back toward her head remained. Massive devil's horns.

On each side of her head, two bleached white goat skulls formed around where her ears had just been. They looked like hair accessories, but they were very clearly attached to her skull and grew out from it. From the open mouths of the goat skulls, where their lower

jaws were missing, her braided pigtails came undone. They formed two long twin tails which reached down to her hips. Her hair bleached silvery white with gradient streaks of brown running through it, the same color as the fur on her forearms and calves.

In front of those skulls, two long fluffy ears popped horizontally out of her head and twitched a couple times, giving them life. From her backside, at the end of her spine, a very fluffy goat tail formed in light then materialized as the spectral casing fractured and burst into a million specs of light.

The transformation sequence ended with a new outfit replacing the ragged remains of the night gown she had hanging off her. It was still barely anything at all. Some garter belt like stockings extended from her waistline underwear to where her inhuman legs began. She had a few gold bangles here and there and a metallic thong that failed miserably at being modest. A couple metal pieces curved around her back, just under her armpits and barely covered her two vital areas of her bare chest and stomach. Golden demonic runes were etched onto a mantle around her neck and collar bones with a single silver goat head brooch over her sternum. The brooch held in place a flowing green cape which billowed out behind her dramatically... in the absence of any wind.

Montée was star struck at first, but when he tried to pull his fist back, it was if he had wedged it between some boulders. For all his size and strength, he couldn't pull away. His confusion and fear was obvious. It was impossible. This girl was a fraction of his size and weighed a smaller fraction than that. If he wanted to pick her up, he should be able to. But this little girl with a death grip on his fist wasn't even trying and couldn't be so much as budged.

“Hey now,” She said devilishly. “You guys said there would be a show, so that makes me the next act. Right? That is why you called me, right?”

She looked around at Montée like she had just realized he was there. She grinned at his struggling like a cruel child would pin a fly trying to buzz away.

“I'd like to get this show on the way, so please, hold your applause.”

Snap. She pushed forward. Crack. The back of Montée's hand was now resting against his arm. With the sickening sound of bones breaking, Isabelle had dislocated and broken his wrist in an instant.

“AAAaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaHHHHHhhhHHHH!!!”

For a huge man roided out beyond all belief, he wasn't immune to pain. Tears welled up in Montée's eyes and rolled down his leather clad cheeks. He had just lost the worst game of mercy in his life. His hand was now pinned against his arm and was hanging on by nothing

but skin and flesh. He couldn't take the pain and fell onto his knees with a mighty thump. His weight suddenly hitting the floor caused it to crack. Even then, Isabelle didn't even flinch or shake.

“Appearing like this ain't nothing.” Isabelle boasted while waving her free hand dismissively and without a care. “For my next magic trick... I'll make my big, lovable and retarded assistant here... Disappear!”

Isabelle grabbed hold of Montée's broken arm with her other hand. When she tightened her grip, I could hear the sound of bone fragments crunching. Montée whimpered loudly, but he couldn't muster up the strength to do anything; pain had sent him into a state of shock. The little devil raised one hoof into the air and stomped it back down, setting up her center of gravity. With that, she pulled on the giant with the first bit of effort I'd seen her give.

“Hocus... Pocus,” She sang.

It was like a hammer toss. Isabelle rotated on her one leg while pushing off the floor with the other. She spun around slowly, but kept picking up speed. After a few rotations, Montée, the non-aerodynamic lunk that he was, started to pick up lift. His dumb nasal moaning started sounding weird as the Doppler effect went haywire while he went round and round.

“Abracadabra,” She cheered with a big smile on her face.

When she could no longer pick up any more speed, and there was almost nothing but a blur between the two, Isabelle trotted a couple steps out of her center of gravity-

“Allaka-SLAM!”

-and she released Montée from her iron grip; he was sent flying. One, two, three pillars of stone blocked his sudden flight plan, but he crashed right through them with ease. He screamed a pitiful moaning shriek as he flew through the air completely helpless. Even the wall far to my right couldn't stop him. The witches who had been standing there had cleared just in time, and Montée's massive frame slammed into the wall. But it kept going. He ended up buried a good meter into the stone where he formed his very own crater shaped in his likeness. But we didn't see him there for long; the wall crashed down on top of him. A pile of debris from the wall and ceiling rained down like an avalanche and buried him behind it. As Isabelle gave out a 'hup hup' while stopping her forward momentum with a couple trots, a massive dust cloud swept over the entire cavern. Everyone was sent into coughing fit and was covered head to toe in gray and black soot except for the little devil who was left unscathed as the cloud washed over her.

She turned to her audience with a smile, gave everyone jazz hands and chimed, “Ta-da!”

No one laughed, no one applauded and there was certainly no cheering. She acted bashfully like they were though.

“Thank you. Thank you. You're a wonderful audience...Don't worry, folks. He's a professional masochist. He'll be alright...” She became sarcastically concerned for a second. “What's that? He's not?”

She looked over at the pile of rubble where Montée was now buried. A lone stone clicked and clattered its way down the rubble as piles of freshly pulverized dust continued to slide. Isabelle turned back toward the audience with a showtime smile on her face.

“Well then, he shouldn't be going around dressed like that because he was totally asking for it.”

Her voice seemed kind but was full of hidden malice. What she said next showed just how much malice; she stopped hiding behind a smile and cutesy voice.

“Who is up for an encore?” She said menacingly.

Her knuckles cracked as she kneaded one claw into the other.

Chapter 75

Dust clouds danced within rays of red moonlight. Wind-like storms of pulverized rock from a man-made explosion finally began to subside; the haze of grey finally started to settle. A chorus of coughing fits and pained moans filled the spaces in-between as the witches and orphaned girls alike were beginning to emerge from cover after sudden unexpected explosion of rock and debris that shook the entire cavern. Now stranded behind a landslide of rock was the hulking behemoth of someone who had once been a man. A girl who was less than a quarter his size, with what seemed like the slightest of efforts, had thrown him haphazardly across the cavern and embedded him into the cave wall which then collapsed on top of him. Now that same demon girl stood before everyone rolling her shoulders, cracking her neck and casting aggressive glances at everyone as they struggled to catch up with what just happened.

Everyone in the cavern had been coated with a fine layer of gray soot from the pulverized rock, everyone but the girl with goat-like demonic features. She was as pristine as ever, her little green cape billowing behind her. Isabelle and this girl at some point occupied the same space for a brief moment. I had a hard time accepting that. What little I had seen and known about the girl was blown away in an instant. Gone was the quiet and reserved little girl. Replacing her was a brash, rude and provocative demon. Crone had chanted her summons for someone named Ba'el. The demon answered.

The demon hopped on one trotter that clicked against the stone while she grabbed the other behind her and resumed stretching. While everyone else was shaking off the dust and putting their wits back together, this girl was calmly limbering up. Occasionally, her joints would crick and even pop which would cause her to groan blissfully.

While the demon flexed, the Crone emerged from behind the cover of her balcony. Her eyes were fixated on the demon with a shock and awe. The demon noticed she had gotten her attention right away and began to approach the arena floor right below the ancient witch.

One of the Crone's witches pulled her self back up in front of Ba'el and spoke with reverence, “Is that- are you truly- have you come to-?”

The goat-demon stopped and turned her head toward the girl. With two of her claw-like fingers she plucked the glasses from her face and placed them gently over the witch's ears and nose. She was almost pushed backward from the sheer strength packed within the little demon's minor gesture. The witch accepted them with what looked like joyous tears in her eyes.

“Nah. I'm the Equinox Rabbit,” Ba'el said matter of factually.

She held up her index claws to the sides of her head like little bunny ears, which looked rather comical next to the huge horns sweeping back over her head. Ba'el stared at the witch with a wide eyed and deadpan expression.

“Can't you tell?”

The witch's look of reverence slowly disintegrated into confusion; everyone else who had shaken the ringing out of their ears had a similar expression on their face. They stared at one another intently until Ba'el broke out laughing very suddenly, and the tenseness of the situation vanished with her sweet childish titter. She lowered her hands from her head, slapped the witch a couple times on her shoulder, gently grabbed hold and then rocked her back and forth a bit in jest. The witch's shoulders heaved a couple times then she also began to chuckle a bit too. She was a little late to the joke, but that wasn't the punchline. A quick left hand jab to her face shattered the glasses on the poor witch's face and sent her flying through the air and crashing into the wall below the Crone's balcony.

I winced at the sound of the impact and the shattering glass before that. There was no way that witch's face should have survived the power in that demon's arm. Before colliding with her face, a brilliant flash of a sickly pale yellow sparked and was promptly shattered. When the back of the witch's head and spine slammed against the wall, the same flash of yellow lit off like a spark. It too also shattered like glass after the impact. Some sort of protective barrier had encased her before like a shield or suit of invisible armor. It was annihilated completely by the time she peeled off the cavern wall and slid down slumped over on the floor. The poor witch was KOed with just one punch.

The demon wasn't fazed by the gasps and shrieks all around her. She calmly lowered her fist back to her side and continued walking closer to the Crone. It was only then she was bothered to answer the poor witch's question.

“I just threw your special ops through a wall. Is that not a big enough hint as to why I'm here? And while we're at it, thanks for showing me your whole ritual. I really hope you didn't spend too much time cooking that one up because it won't work again.”

Every trot forward caused the witches to retreat further and further as if there was an invisible wall keeping them a fixed distance away. There was only one person present that did not, and that was the Crone herself. As Ba'el approached, her face actually became brighter. Her face flushed red, and she was fidgeting like a school girl about to meet her idol. That little demon was the complete opposite; her expression grew increasingly disgusted as she got closer. The head witch didn't even seem the least bit off-put after observing one of

her followers get savagely beaten.

the Crone spoke with rapt breath, “It really is you. I've waited for this for so long... Too long.”

“Not long enough,” Ba'el snapped back.

With one last clop, the little demon stood before the balcony and crossed her arms over her chestThe Crone leaned on the balcony and wistfully stared at the furious demon below. Ba'el's hostility toward her didn't seem to faze her at all. She just kept talking without skipping a beat.

“I've longed to feel this aura of yours for centuries. Now we can finally be together again and-”

“Did it ever occur to you that I wanted to be left alone?” Ba'el lashed out.

the Crone's eyebrows knitted, and the tone in the little demon's voice looked as though it hurt her physically. It was like watching someone get a dagger to the heart and then seeing it twist.

The witch pouted, “Ba'el...”

“Shut up! You don't seriously believe I wouldn't sense what you were up to, do you? If I ever wanted to see you again I would have done it myself. If you think you can just talk to me in that tone and with look on your face after everything you've pulled, you are in for a rude awakening.”

Now the Crone's face was slowly turning away from the vapid ogling. Her tone still had not a trace of hostility, but she raised her voice as if this was all the beginning of a lover's spat.

“Ha! Don't be coy with me, Ba'el. I know you well. You think you're so shady and mysterious. No, you're not the tall, dark and handsome character you think you are. You did come on your own. Deny it all you want, but you and I are connected. I know... Even after all this time...”

But the witch couldn't stay mad for long. She was just as suddenly blushing again and caressing her own rosy cheeks with her hands.

“I'm a little shocked how much you've changed, but I've changed too. Nothing will stop my-”

“Shut! Up!” Ba'el roared.

The ground itself trembled; everyone but the two of them covered their ears and cowered from the powerful echoes. A massive explosion of sound tore through the air from such a small body. It even kicked up some of the loose deposits of dust which had settled down a couple minutes ago.

“You can't deny me!” the Crone yelled back with a twisted smile on her face. “I've fled for my life over countless years. I've cowered in the dankest and most terrible places imaginable for

decades at a time. I've endured unimaginable pain and suffering... That's all over now. Now I have home and a family. After all these long centuries, I can finally face you again. That's why I've called you here. We can finally be a family again!"

"What family locks each other in cages?" Ba'el snarled. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"You're such a shy little child," the Crone said apologetically. "I needed to make you listen."

"Don't 'child' me you vicious little whelp. I worked long and hard on that disguise. Even consecrated ground didn't make me break sweat. Can you even begin to imagine how many layers such a shield would have? I wanted to be left alone!"

"Alone? Why would you want to be alone now?" the Crone thought aloud then began to shake her head. "No... No no no no. That's not right at all. The demon I remember was so big, so powerful, but in the end his eyes were so very sad. So sad... So lonely. Not a friend in the world or in all the hells."

The head witch seemed to be sure of herself, but she stopped, and that expression on her face was wiped clean when the goat-demon began to chuckle and laugh. Ba'el couldn't hold on, and her chuckle became a cackle before she was laughing out loud.

"Are those the thoughts you've had in that rotten head of yours for all these years?" Ba'el could still hardly speak as she had to force her laughter back down as she talked. "I hope you didn't spend too many decades cooking up all that... You're just as sloppy as you were all those years ago. It's like you haven't learned anything. 'Appear before me now'!" She said, imitating the Crone's voice in a mocking tone. "That's how it went, right? You didn't even say anything about appearing before you in that little trap of yours, did ya? Except I was already before you. See? Semantics. They are really important when dealing with these kinds of things, but you were always too quick. Too impatient... You really haven't learned anything."

the Crone raised her voice, "Don't forget you came her of you own will to-"

"I knew you would eventually try to drag me here kicking and screaming," Ba'el interrupted coldly. "I know you far more than you claim to know me. Why else would you gathering so many girls to drain their mana? Why would you do it at the same time there was going to be a Red Moon? Why would I ever not assume you wouldn't try to rope me into it after all these years?... That's why I decided I needed to see it for myself. But I'd never get close enough without being caught, right? Well, I happened to stumble upon the perfect piece of cover. An opportunity beyond my wildest imagination."

Ba'el turned around to look at me. There was a wide grin on her

face, a single fang overbiting her lower lip. I stared back at her, and she greeted me with a wink. That gesture worried me, but before I could implore her with my confusion to explain herself, she turned back to face the Crone.

"So I decided to follow where you were taking everyone, and you never saw me coming... So you plan to corrupt the entire Marches. Quite a feat. Very audacious of you... It's also really damn stupid."

"You'll come around to it, Ba'el." the Crone said; her patience now starting to wear thin. "We'll talk all this over... Very thoroughly-"

Without another word or gesture of acknowledgment, the little demon turned around and trotted away from the Crone. It took a few seconds for the witch to react.

"Ba'el! Don't you dare ignore me now!"

"We're done here," She replied curtly. "I got other things to do today."

"Don't forget where you are, my dear old master. You have come to my domain. It is my ley lines that crisscross this place. And gathered here is my family!"

Snapping to attention, the gathered witches sensed the change of tone in the Crone immediately. Ba'el still didn't have a care in the world, and she kept on walking while the witch was fuming. She was once again standing right next to me. She muttered something under her breath. I could swear she said something like, 'get ready'. When I looked back at her, she was busy watching the witches around the room readying themselves.

Get ready for what?

"Seize her. Restrain her! But don't hurt her. That will be my job later," A wicked sleazy smile spread across her face. "Alone."

The dead silence that lingered between their spats had died a sudden death. Magical energies now crackled all around. Half a company of witches surrounded the two of us and all the girls from all directions. They brandished their staves and wands, and I'm positive their safeties were off. Even I could feel the roiling energies at play. Hairs on the back of my neck stood up as though all those arcane powers were static readying to collect into one massive thunderbolt... And I was still flat on my stomach at where it was all gathering. I wasn't properly grounded for this.

I felt a fuzzy claw pat me on the ass a couple times. The sudden sensation caused my lethargic and aching body to jolt back to attention. I wanted to scream and yell to vent the frustration of being so casually violated, but it all got caught in the back of my throat when Ba'el clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"What was another important thing I always told you Crone?

Before you plan to get yourself into deep shit, always prepare a way to dig yourself out."

A flash of green light shone on the floor beneath the two of us. It banished the dull red light from the moonbeams with ease, and its intensity stung my eyes. Two green lights streaked across the ground, forming bright neon lines on the stone floor. They quickly darted forward and back, turning at sharp and sudden corners until they finally met after the lights burning across the floor formed a complete pentagram. While I stared on at the light show, Ba'el dropped down on top of my back, and I felt the lukewarm steel underwear of hers collide with my aching spine. She then wrapped her arm around my neck in a chokehold and pulled my head back. I felt my throat close up just below my larynx; and tried as I might to breath, my lungs were completely cut off from the world. I tensed up, and my body panicked on instinct. All my senses focused on the smooth skin of her bare armpit and back of the elbow which I clung to desperately but couldn't even budge with every last ounce of my strength as I flailed like a wild animal caught in a snare.

She leaned over and whispered directly into my ear, "You'll thank me later for this."

My eyes were too busy bulging out of their sockets to appreciate anything.

"You don't want to breathe during this."

Not buying it! My vision felt like it was going black and- No, it wasn't going dark. I was moving. My body was sinking into the floor. I watched the witches scamper and scurry in a hurry to close in on the two of us, but we weren't sticking around for long it seemed.

There was a sensation overwhelming my body, besides the suffocation, that I had never felt before. My body melted into the stone floor, and Ba'el on my back followed as we sunk into the floor, but then we very suddenly entered a free fall. My first instinct was to scream, but I was being choked in the vice-grip of this demon, so I never got the chance. I could feel the inside of my mouth, but I felt outside of it was nothing but solid stone. My vision went completely black, and my eyelids and lashes brushed up against something that was pressing right up against my face. Everything went completely silent as well. Just beyond my ears was nothing but stone, and there was nowhere near anything big or loud enough to vibrate it.

An intense and vivid feeling of claustrophobia overwhelmed me. This was more than just being crammed into tight quarters; every bit of space beyond my body was occupied with stone. But that wasn't enough; there was also a sensation of vertigo as I felt the organs in my body churn as my body fell downward and neared terminal velocity.

It was the strangest thing though. I was falling without the

feeling of air rushing past my face. There was nothing I could do though. My mind had retreated to this calm and isolated place while my body thrashed desperately in fear while the last life in it was being squeezed out.

It must have only been about ten seconds or so, but my body registered much longer than that. After picking up enough speed to reach more than halfway to terminal velocity, the sensation of entrapment left me very suddenly. I opened my eyes and still saw only darkness, but I could feel wind rush past me, and I could hear the whoosh of it as it brushed past me. A fizzle of light like a set of freshly lit flares shot out, and a series of four bright lights arced out from somewhere on my back and hung in the air. The darkness was banished instantly, and a quick panicked look at my surroundings showed an absolutely massive cavern.

Ba'el's chokehold let go, and when I finally felt the pressure against my throat release, I gasped to desperately fill my lungs with air. The air felt stagnant but at the same time cool and crystal. I don't think anyone, or anything, has been down her for a long time. I got one look upward and saw no possible hole we could have entered in from... But that wasn't possible. Was it? The drag pushing against me, along with my general lack of aerodynamics, soon caused me to go into a wild tumble. Ba'el's miserly bulk which had been clinging to my back had disappeared. I could only catch sight of her every so often, she had detached from me at some point and was a couple meters below me now.

Looking down was perhaps my worse decision today.

Approaching fast was a vast expansive body of still black water. I wasn't sure if this was part of the plan, but there was no sign that either of us were slowing down at all. Hitting that water going this fast would not be much different from hitting stone. There wasn't a thing I could do; the only thing that was within my power was to eye the fast approaching body of water for a split second as I spun around helplessly in the air. At least I could scream while I did it now. That was a marginal improvement to just a few seconds ago.

Ba'el hit the water first, and the sickening sound of a body crashing against the tense water surface greeted me before I also hit the water. I was more fortunate because I fell directly onto the roiling water which the demon had broken for me. But that only meant I would be conscious, or even just alive, for the bone chilling freeze of the hidden lake. I went from about fifty meters per second to zero in the blink of an eye as my own natural bouncy fought against the downward pull of gravity. I had only just gotten reacquainted with being able to breathe, so I frantically thrashed and kicked my legs to head back up toward the lights which I could still see hanging near the ceiling high

above.

My legs felt like they were tied together. There was just too much extra cloth floating around, and all the extra weight from it being soaked wasn't helping much either. The only thing I had to keep me going was a burst of adrenaline I had been saving up ever since I nearly soiled myself when that freakish oaf was descending upon me with his meaty, bone-pulverizing mitts. A few thrashes, kicks and flails later I managed to break the surface and tilt my head back in order to fill my lungs with air. Another bonus was the lack of any serious current or waves. My throbbing chest calmed, and I looked around as I treaded freezing water.

But I didn't see the girl anywhere.

I desperately spun around as I kept my head above the water, but I didn't see anyone else floating nearby or far away. All I saw in the distance was dry land about thirty meters away. When I looked down... I couldn't see the bottom. The four lights handing up near the ceiling were not bright enough... Perhaps nothing could be bright enough to pierce that darkness.

“Ba'el!” I yelled out, hoping in vain she might be out there in the darkness and out of the water.

It was obvious where she was. She was below. I pumped my arms and circled around the area as I looked down into the inky black water. The heat at my core was starting to flicker, and my limbs were starting to be robbed of their warmth. It wouldn't be much longer till they were frozen, and the muscles in my arms and legs gave out. If I swallowed too much of this water, any of it at all actually, I could easily drown. If the girl had already done so...

There wasn't any time. I took a deep breath and dove straight down. My arms flailed around wildly as I paddled deeper into the near freezing water. I hoped against hope that my hand would hit something, anything. My hand eventually brushed against something almost as fluid as the water itself, but I just barely felt it against the back of my hand. My reaction was instant, and I grabbed hold of it tight. It wrapped around my fist; it was cloth, cold damp cloth. I yanked upward and felt a weight on the other end. That was good enough for me, and I swam back up and broke through the surface once more. I pulled on what I believed was her cape until I got a grip on the girl herself. My arm wrapped underneath hers, and as I kicked my legs, I brought her head above the water.

“Hey! You alright?”

She didn't respond. I looked around till I found the shore I spotted before. We couldn't stay in the water any longer, and my strength was starting to fade fast. I had about another minute and no more until I risked passing out myself. With the girl's back resting

against my chest, I wrapped my arms underneath her own and started kicking as hard as I could. She couldn't weight much more than twenty kilos, so at least I had that going for me as I fought against slipping deep into the deadly cold water.

Every last bit of energy in my body seeped and poured out of me as I burned what adrenaline I had left to swim my way back to shore while carrying the child sized monster with me. I nearly poked my eyes out on her giant, swept-back horns a couple times.

When my back hit stone, I got the best grip that I could with my sopping wet leather shoes and pulled the girl up with me. The shore was steep, but not so sharp that it was impossible to merely back up onto flat ground. I figured this whole place was not just a natural cave formation; it was dug out and leveled by hand or magic. Traces of erosion and wear told me it was all done long ago. Luckily, it was still serviceable.

With the girl on her back and out of the water, I briefly collapsed onto my back as well and heaved heavy breaths which I tried to suppress as my cold shock nearly caused me to genuinely hyperventilate. I checked on Ba'el to my right, but she still hadn't moved at all. My blood went cold again.

I scrambled over to the demon and raised her tiny thin arm. I checked her wrist for a pulse and didn't feel a thing. My panic was very real now. I rested my ear against the center of her flat chest and didn't feel or hear a thing. My fingers against her neck didn't feel anything either. It was a race against time now, so I grabbed hold of her head, struggling with her horns and goat heads coming out of the sides of her head, and titled it back. With one hand, I pinched her nose and a took a few breaths.

Now wasn't the time to worry or get flustered, Laven.

I leaned forward until I could feel the faintest body heat coming from her face, until I was stopped dead in my tracks. A fuzzy hand with a thumb against my left temple and three digits on my right pressed inward on the pressure points just beside my eyes.

Ba'el's nasally voice growled, “What in the hells do you think you're doing?”

Before I could give a sigh of relief or explain myself, my head felt as though it had been stuffed into a compactor. I thought my brains would pop out from the top of my head or out of my ears. The sound of creaking bones from my skull filled my ears as my cranium was almost ready to fracture and burst like an overripe tomato if she squeezed any harder. Before my head was flattened, I was thrown off into the distance—I got some good air—landing about eight meters away further down the shore.

I heard Ba'el growl in the distance, “Since when did I give

you permission to touch me like that?"

My poor back took yet another blow, but this time I sat upright quickly despite the crippling pain. I looked back at Ba'el who was now sitting upright and glaring at me furiously with a flushed face. I felt relief at her being at first, but the uncharacteristic coyness on her face shocked me. Even her arms were now crossed over her chest and latched onto her shoulders.

Her back went rigid as though she had been suddenly shocked by a bolt of electricity. She quickly realized the state she was in and lowered her arms. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and got back onto her hooves. Still dripping wet, she shook her head which caused her twin tails to spin around like rotary blades. She kicked her legs and spun her arms, and her damp fur released sprays of water. The fluffy goat tail jutting out from her behind and the goat ears on the sides of her head shook and dried themselves off as well. She eventually noticed I had been watching her.

"What do you think this is? A wet tunic contest?" She snarled.

She went from comatose to bitch in a flash.

"No, but be glad it isn't. You'd be far from taking first place."

I wasn't much better. Her eyes narrowed, but this time she placed her hands on her hips and learned forward in my direction.

"I pulled you out from the water before you drowned. Then I thought I'd have to resuscitate you when your ass was lying unconscious after I pulled you out."

My bones creaked. Perhaps a few were ready to snap when I stood up, but I wasn't about to keep lying down and let this girl talk down to me. Her eyes tracked my every move, and she had to lean her head back to follow me. A small victory.

"Good to know a selfless act is still given plenty of thanks," I quipped.

"You're not getting one now. Not with that attitude." She snapped back as she straightened out her back. "Don't forget my only competition right now is you."

She pointed a finger at me accusingly; me who was wearing a drenched brown dress with a tattered hem as it all clung to my skin. My broad shoulders screamed masculinity, and any stretch of the imagination that my disguise would work was blasted away. We glared at one another trying to drill holes into the head of the other with our eyes. Snarls and growls in the back of our throats probably made us look like a couple of feuding mutts. I shrugged my shoulders with my palms raised slightly in the air. Ba'el bared her teeth but suddenly chuckled.

"I like you. We'll get along just fine."

I sighed with relief, but suddenly a nagging thought in the back of my head boiled over to the front. I looked all around and noticed it really was just the two of us all the way down here.

"Wait! All the others-"

"Forget it," Ba'el said.

I turned back around and glowered at the demon in disbelief.

She waved her claw dismissively, "There isn't anything we can do right now."

To say I got a little irate would be an understatement, "We're just going to leave them all behind?"

Now it was the demon's turn to sigh.

"the Crone ain't got a leg to stand on for tonight. And I can't just make everyone incorporeal. Besides that was all very risky business. There's a reason why people don't practice those kinds of spells often anymore."

Wait. What?

She continued to talk about very macabre things in a very calm disinterested voice, "Not everyone is powerful enough or has enough concentration to keep that kind of thing forever. What do you think happens when your body and something solid like rock takes up the same space? What wins, flesh or stone? Let's just say there have been a few wizards and witches over the years who have lost some limbs."

I shook my head to banish the image she put in my head, but I also had to ask, "And the falling part? We could have died hitting the water like that?"

"I thought I'd miss it," She said casually.

"Hitting stone isn't any better!" I screamed.

She stared at me with a puzzled look on her face. Then it dawned upon her face as she studied me; she gently pounded her fist into her open hand.

"Right. Mortal. Sorry. Forgot about that."

Hold on. She overlooked the possibility that my hitting the ground at that speed would most certainly kill me?

"Anyways, they'll be fine. The only ones who should be worrying right now is-"

As the demon spoke I realized she had been leaning further and further over. Any second now she'd stretch her center of mass to the limit and-

Thump!

The demon tipped and fell face first into the floor. A hollow clonk of her horns struck first and broke her fall. At least it wasn't a splat. She didn't stay motionless for long, so she seemed to still be okay. Mostly. I stood in the distance and watched as she struggled to

pull herself back onto her hooves. With stubborn bullheaded determination, she managed to drag herself back up, but after her eyes stopped spinning inside her head, she glared at me furiously.

"Why didn't you-"

"Semantics," I said. "I'm not supposed to touch you, aren't I?"

"...Fair Point," She replied while her legs were still a bit wobbly.

I think the reason for our hasty retreat was painfully obvious.

"From now on... Just keep that slobbering maw to yourself."

I decided to get the obvious question I had off my chest.

"...You couldn't fight with her right now if you tried..."

Ba'el slapped her cheeks a couple times between her claws and shook her head violently to snap herself back to attention. I walked a bit closer in case she did begin to fall over again.

"Ding ding ding!" She said, mimicking a game show buzzer. "Give the man his prize! Right, I've lost my sea legs, so to speak. Haven't had the chance to recharge in... Actually, I don't want to think about how long... Just know I spent too long cooped up in that boring polymorph."

"Poly-what?"

"That was no mere illusion, boy," She said, painfully thrusting her finger into my chest. "This is real professional spell craft. Altering your real physical form... Of course, the furthest I could get was still just a little girl, but it worked. It worked for decades... What? You've never seen something like it before?"

I thought about that one for a bit, but I'm pretty sure I actually had.

"No, I have," I replied. "A princess who was actually a dragon all along."

"Ha!" the demon laughed. "People think they can just turn a cliché on its head and that makes em real clever. A genuine Matthias Stonewrit."

She didn't laugh for long though. She soon turned her eyes up to the ceiling. With a flick of her wrist, the white lights which had been hanging above came crashing back down to the ground. They shrunk in size and brightness and started to orbit closely around her index claw. She then tossed them up one more time, and they started to circle in the air above our heads.

"If it was boring then why do it?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear me? Are you deaf? I want to be left alone."

"And you have to go through so many hoops, why?"

The demon cleared her throat.

"I suppose I should introduce myself proper. You don't

speak Infernal, do you? No. Didn't think so. You wouldn't be able to pronounce my actual name if you tried without it..."

With her soaked cloak in one hand, she wrapped it over her chest and face then threw it aside in an exaggerated manner.

"You can just call me Ba'el," She said in a very official heraldic voice while she stood valiantly, yet childishly, with one hand on her hip and the other with her palm facing toward me. "Duke from the Third Hell. Baphomet of the Dark Heart Order. Master of the Magmatear falls. Corrupter of man. Defiler of the Sacred... Retired."

She counted off each title on her fingers and thumb, clenching them into a fist which she held up into the air for the last... Wait... Retired? Six instead of five? I couldn't suppress my surprise. Hearing that a demon could retire from their duties is now in a long list of things which in hindsight I never expected to hear.

"That's right. Retired. Sick of it all. After the last war, I didn't want any part of all this nonsense any longer. I gave my two weeks notice then hit the road. Found a place and slumbered... I think."

"You think?"

She lost interest in playing her little game, and her attention went elsewhere lightning quick, conveniently ignoring me and my additional questions.

“We can't stay here for long. We need to get moving.”

"No. You wait a moment. What did you just-"

Ba'el turned and started to walk away but turned around when I failed to follow her immediately.

“Come on. We just fell through a mountain, but we did it in a straight line. They're going to catch up if we just wait around here.”

I was confused, wet, tired, cold and apprehensive, but she wasn't going to have any of that. Her claw wrapped around my wrist, and she continued walking. It was like my feet were cemented in the ground, but then a rope lasso from a runaway train tore me out by the roots. I still couldn't wrap my head around it. She had to weigh almost third of what I did. If you could only trust someone as far as you could throw them, then I could trust her quite a bit. Then again, she could muster enough strength to lift me above her head and break me in half on her knee like a baked potato if she really wanted to. For now, my arm felt like it was going to rip free from its socket if I didn't start walking.

“Whoa whoa, hold on!” I protested.

“Bitching and moaning later,” She said mildly irritated. “We're walking here.”

"Yeah well, I didn't even introduce my-"

"Yeah yeah. Save it for later. I know enough for now," she said dismissively.

“No. Listen. I'm not walking deeper into the earth with a demon from hell without understanding exactly what the fuck is going on.”

“We're looking for a place to start a fire and hide till tomorrow evening.”

“That's not what- Achoo!”

I sneezed. Hard. Oh yeah, all these cold water drenched clothes were going to give me pneumonia very soon... I might already be in trouble if that's as worked up about it as I could get.

Ba'el turned around, took one look at me, snapped her fingers and shook it while pointing back at me.

“Right. Mortal. Sorry about that.”

“Can you stop rubbing that in?”

“No.”

She had a grin on her face when she turned back around to look where she was actually going. We passed though the threshold of what looked like old service tunnels which were conveniently straight and rarely turned, and when they did they did so very gradually. They really were bare bone though. There was hardly enough head room for myself, and sometimes my hair brushed against the roof which caused me to wince in fear that I'd smash my forehead against something sometime. At least firefly-like lights floating around us made darkness the least of my concerns. I had my doubts that we had any real direction.

“Do you have any-”

“Nope. No clue,” she answered immediately.

Not very reassuring.

“Who do you think I am? A titivillus? If we get lost, then that just means they'll have an even harder time finding us.”

Not very reassuring at all.

“Stop being such a damn baby. We'll be fine. Save your strength.”

“Excuse me for being defensive,” I said lashing out. “I'm still stuck at the point where everything went to hell twenty minutes ago.”

“We're on the same side for now, okay?”

“Are we?”

“I just saved you from being pounded into ground beef. Then I saved you from being raped and disintegrated... Or disintegrated then raped.

I stared at the back of the girl's head. She turned around and looked at me to meet my puzzled expression.

“Believe me: they're an innovative lot,” She said casually.

We continued walking for a while and took a couple more turns at some intersections until she decided to keep talking.

“Look. The Church sent you here, right? Right. They know the Crone is up to something, and they want to bring that back down. I don't know why you agreed to do it, and I don't care. You want to stop her, and so do I.”

“I got the impression she and everyone else were ready to worship you,” I said.

“Maybe, but I also don't want to be plugged in as some pedo power plant slash sex toy.”

That... Was hard to argue with. But I still had to know what was up with those two. They seemed to know each other. Perhaps intimately.

“But why would she-”

“Less talk. More walking.”

“Are you actually going to seriously answer any of my questions?”

“Walk,” she said menacingly.

I didn't have to see her face to imagine the kind of expression she was making right now. At least it confirmed my suspicion that something ran deep between this girl and the witch. She began to pull harder on my arm as she picked up the pace. Perhaps hoping that I would forget about it if I had to focus more on where I stepped to keep my balance. I don't think she would stop moving just because I tripped. She'd drag me if she had to.

“In exchange for shutting the hell up and covering me, I'll answer whatever question ya got when we've found a place to hide. But for now, shut your damn mouth. Don't make it any easier for them to find us.”

That would explain the death grip. If she was a walking flare of magical energy, then I guess that would make me the flash suppressor. Perhaps that was the only reason she bothered to escape with me in tow to begin with.

We continued walking through the maze of paths and auxiliary bunkers. Old, rusted and broken down equipment that looked as though it had been stripped of parts was strewn everywhere. Flood gates, old storerooms, everything to maintain a large facility. Most of them were crumbled. Some rooms had half of the roof caved in. In other places, there were less refined artifacts. Old pickaxes with rotten wooden handles and turned over mine carts. I remembered what had been said about this long ago. There used to be an irrigation system here, but it was also a mine.

Several obstacles stood in our path during the whole meandering journey. There was nothing that could stop this demon though. She lifted boulders blocking our path, and she leaped up walls of rubble just as agile as a mountain goat... At least that second one

made some sort of sense. But just as soon as things began to obey physical laws, her spindly girly arms somehow single handedly hauled me up all these roadblocks.

Maybe it was only a mine later on. It could have also turned into a salvage operation. Either way it all happened a long time ago. Now this place had been all but forgotten. It would have to be. The Church didn't even know about this place it seemed. How else would a coven of witches get away with practicing magic so openly? But to carve all this out, with a water reservoir that huge which has stayed contained for perhaps longer than a thousand years... It would be quite a feat for a pre-industrial society. There was always the magic element, but-

"Finally!" Ba'el said exhausted.

I turned from my thoughts and saw that we had come to what looked like a wooden shack lost deep within the mine. I guess calling it a shack would be too fair. It was a wood wall that separated this part of the tunnel from whatever laid on the other side. What gave both of us hope was that there might actually be something behind that crumbling wooden door. All Ba'el had to do was roll a few boulders of the way and clear a path. The door itself was stuck, due to how the wood and cave have shifted over many years, so the demon just ripped it off.

"After you," she said, holding the door aloft with on hand and gesturing me to enter with the other.

Inside was what appeared to be an old foreman's quarters. The place had been abandoned for decades, perhaps longer, but there was still the furniture and gadgets which made it someone's home away from home. I wasn't sure any of it was safe to sit on or turn on, but it would do at least for a night.

With a thump and a crash, Ba'el dropped the door back into place and let it lean in place against the door frame. She walked past me and inspected the room for a long while, nodding the whole time. She grabbed an old lantern and went searching for some lamp oil. With a source of actual heat and light, she killed the dancing fireflies at last and set it down upon the rickety rotten table at the center of the room.

With the shadows from the lantern dancing across her, she turned her green eyes toward me and said, "Now... If we're going to stop this witch, you need to know some things. Things about this world that everyone else but her, I and the immortals have forgotten." I caught a faint smile for a moment before she continued, "We're also gonna have to make some preparations."

Chapter 76

It was cramped, it was damp, it was an overall terrible place to be; but in comparison to the alternative, my spirits were relatively high. A few wooden panels along the walls and a couple planks dividing up the hole in the earth which once served as a mine foreman's office made it at least a bit homely. I was standing there in that lonely secluded room which was so far away from everything, a place deep within an ancient labyrinth a good kilometer beneath the surface. Above was a rabid coven of witches hell bent on dominating the local area through magic trickery on an apocalyptic scale. What lay below... I didn't want to think about that actually.

A lone oil lamp hissed, and a tiny wisp of flame danced within it. Shadows from the light crawled over the debris, and the faintest tendrils of heat clawed weakly at its surroundings. I could hardly feel a thing. My body was still incredibly numb ever since being dunked and tossed about in that freezing reservoir. My clothes were still clinging to my skin, and my core temperature was dropping. It took some time till my brain was jilted enough that I even thought about dealing with that little problem. Just a minor issue which could cripple and kill me with the onset of pneumonia. I decided I would just blame it on the witches and the fear of my body being crushed either by impact at high speeds or a giant's fist.

When I snapped back to reality at last I realized I had to get changed. For starters, I risked getting ill and that would be fatal given where I was, who was following... and maybe who I was with... More importantly, wearing this shitty dress for any longer than I absolutely had to was something I was not going to stand for. I stood up, grabbed hold of it by the fabric on my upper back and pulled the soggy mess off over my head. My shorts and underwear were still soaked, but it was a start at-

I heard a sharp whistle, a wolf call. My heart sunk, and my body tensed up.

“Oh my~” Ba'el playfully cooed behind me.

I turned my head slowly, and there she was. She was still sitting on the opposite side of the table, unmoved. I looked down, bare chested, and back at her. Without a word, I looked away and went to turning the room upside down for something dry.

“Oh, come on now,” she teased. “Don't be that way.”

I thrust my finger accusingly in her direction, desperate to divert the conversation.

“Just-” I stuttered. “-Just find me something dry. I'm not as fortunate you to get away with wearing metal bits for clothing that don't get wet.”

She waved her hand dismissively. Ba'el wasn't even for a second considering buying what I was pushing.

"Relax. Don't strain yourself. Go nude; see if I care. You don't have anything I haven't seen before."

My flushed red face was just a social reflex.

"No, I don't think-"

She interrupted me, "What? You think I'm scared of sharing the room with a big bad naked man?"

She was barely able to hold herself from breaking out into uproarious laughter. Until her face went deadly serious; her green eyes smoldered and burned with killing intent, and a powerful soul crushing aura radiated off of her.

"That is... unless... you did plan on attacking me."

I wasn't sure if the sensation of the earth rumbling was real or imagined. It felt as though there was an icy hand wrapped around my heart that was squeezing tighter and tighter. The faster my heart thumped, the stronger the grip got.

"pft-" Her face contorted, and a snort escaped her lips.

A few thousand kilos of pressure per square centimeter evaporated immediately.

"Ah ha ha ha ha!" She laughed, rocking back and forth on her chair while pointing back at me.

I fidgeted on the spot, turned my head away in disgust, defeat, and went back to salvaging whatever rags I could find to wipe myself dry. She knew full well how the power dynamics work here. A bit of fun at my expense when my mind was already on the breaking point and was just starting to settle back down. She could lift boulders with ease that could crush me to death if they were so much as dropped on top of me. If there was anyone who was in danger here, it was me. This wasn't a time to be embarrassed and self conscious; it was a time to keep my flight instinct at the ready.

My efforts were finally rewarded when I found not just some old wiping rags caked with decades old grease but some leftover clothes which must have belonged to some miner from long ago. I ducked behind one of the wooden partitions and removed the rest of my soggy wet clothing. My lukewarm hands felt like they were burning hot when I touched my frigid skin. I wanted to just focus on drying myself off with the black stained and grimy rags, but I had to toss my gaze back over my shoulder now and then. Ba'el's silence unnerved me.

What a crock of shit. Now I'm suddenly terrified of a little girl and what she's capable of. If you told anyone about this scenario out of context, I'd be a laughingstock.... At least the clothes fit, somewhat. Whoever wore them last had a girth, and I had to really tighten it and hold it in place around my waist with an extra strip of cloth tied in a

sash. The sleeves on the shirt were also really loose; it was a couple sizes too big and wearing it made me feel like some kind of lame hipster... Still, it was better than the dress. I'll just take improvements in my luck when I can get them.

I begrudgingly came out of hiding after taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. As I left the protective shield of wood behind—that which blotted out mischievous glances—I saw the demon sitting down at the table. She was calm as could be almost somber, actually. There was no sneering demon but a little girl with a one liter glass bottle with a clear liquid inside. She must have found it somewhere while I was changing... Wait, don't tell me that's what I think it-

Ba'el lifted the bottom of the bottle to the sky and downed three quick glugs with ease. With a bang, she slammed its bottom back down onto the table. A long exhale came from her nose, and then her eyes turned slowly back toward me. She pushed the bottle lightly, and it slid across the wooden surface and stopped just short of toppling over the edge. She nudged me on with her eyes, and I felt it would be bad manners to deny her. I took one careful whiff of the contents, and I started to have second doubts. It didn't have any smell at all. Still, the prying and expecting eyes of the little demon made me think I might as well-

My body spat out what little I tried to sip immediately. The second it hit my lips and tongue, before it even hit my throat; my body convulsed, and my self preservation system kicked in automatically. I coughed, heaved, spat and a spray of clear liquid erupted from my mouth. This wasn't a spirit; it was moonshine. It was more suited to cleaning out engines than it was to drink safely. Any living thing that touched it would die. Once again, Ba'el couldn't contain her laughter.

“So the big bad man can't hold it in?” She cried merrily, wiping away tears of laughter.

I wiped my arm across my mouth and stood there, shell shocked for a moment. I shook my head and clawed my finger nails against my tongue to get the fatal aftertaste off my taste buds before they died for good. Not an ounce of composure was left in my body to snap back at her.

“If you are not going for round two, hand it over.”

There was a pang in my conscious, and it wasn't one based on reason. She was clearly a monstrous creature yet appeared little more than a child. Ba'el held her paw out, waiting for me to return the bottle. There was a war between two feelings in my mind. She looked like a minor. I couldn't get over that. Not being suckered into buying booze for rebellious children with puppy dog eyes must have been beaten into me pretty good. She wasn't one though, was she? I knew that. That had to be the case, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head. I

eventually relented and slapped the glass back into the palm of her hand. She took another quick full mouth full and downed it without even flinching before setting it gently back down on the table.

"I can't get sloshed, not like you humans can... But-"

Her eyes twitched as if a rogue thought had shaken the girl to her core. She rolled her eyes downward and to the side. They focused on something faraway, far beyond our current surrounds. Far back into what I assumed was the past.

"But the taste is-" She paused for a moment while her eyes seemed to search for the right word to settle her feelings. "Nostalgic."

Ba'el ruffled her paws through her hair violently to shoo away the rogue thoughts and regain the cocky composure she had just a moment ago.

"I haven't had the chance for a good stiff drink in forty years. I was asleep for a long time before that, so you could say I haven't had a chance to wet my whistle for almost a thousand years now," She said, then let out a weak chortle. "I hear you humans drink to forget, well, all it does for me is make me remember."

"What are you trying to remember?" I asked.

"A lot of things," She replied. "Things I'd rather stay forgotten. But now is the time to own up to my mistakes. I've run away from them for long enough."

"About the Crone, I take it?"

"Yeah. Mostly about that."

We stewed in silence after that. She sat at the table; her index claw clinging to the mouth of the bottle. It rotated around on the edge of the glass bottom; the remaining half of its contents swished about inside. I stood up on the opposite side of the table, still tense, and my body language no doubt overtly defensive. There was no help from my end to push this along, so I swallowed my doubts. I pulled the chair out —which had been set aside for me—then pulled myself in closer. Ba'el's eyes looked back up from the floor and onto me when I did so.

I pressed her onward, "You said there was something I had to know, that's what you said, right? About what the deal was between you and the Crone, correct?"

She smiled again after a long drought. Her voice became evermore chipper again, "You got a mission, so do I. We probably want different things out of it, but we can work together to get the same end result."

"You want to be left alone."

"That's right," Ba'el nodded. "So long as the Crone keeps doing what's she's been doing, I'll never get that wish of mine. And so long as she's doing what she has been doing, you'll never finish that little crusade of yours."

“I'm not doing something so noble as a crusade,” I said.

She shoved her finger in my face accusingly, “Careful when you put noble and crusade like that in the same sentence. You're talking with a demon here. I've lost good friends that way.”

Her eyes were smoldering.

“Friends? I find that hard to believe.”

The barb came out of my mouth before I had a chance to censor it. Ba'el stared at me, smiled weakly and lifted the bottle off the table.

She brought it to her lips and, just before drowning herself with its content, let her words slip from the corner of her mouth, “Ain't that the truth?”

After puffing her cheeks out with another mouthful, she brought it back down with a loud thud on top of the poor rickety table. Her voice became hollow as before, but this time she kept her eyes on me and didn't look away.

“Let's just say the one time I tried to fix that... It all went to hell.”

“Literally?” I asked.

“I wish,” Ba'el chuckled weakly.

Silence once again descended around the table. Shadows played games with the light, so I couldn't tell if the darkened expression on her face was real or just illusionary.

“Listen here now, Laven,” She finally blurted out, banishing the silence. “Before I go on- I don't know how much you really know about demons, so I'm going to let you in on something you're not going to read about in any book. At least not a book written by any human who wouldn't afterward end up getting burned at the stake for writing it.”

She held up her three fingers.

“There are three things to know about demons,” she said while folding back her first ring/pinky finger. “Demons honor their oaths. Demons are bound to their contracts...”

She held her last finger up for a bit. The dramatic pause was palpable, and she was forcing it a bit now.

“Demons always... always... place their desires above all else.”

Ba'el's eyes flickered with light and a bit of fire when she said it. The air froze, as if the natural world itself was scared of what the demon had just said. That might have just been my mind playing tricks because she reclined on the back legs of her chair and balanced there with her hands resting on the back of her head. She looked as relaxed as could be.

“That's everything you need to know. Everything after that is

just politics and diplomacy."

"And that's the tricky part, isn't it?" I said. "Words can have double meanings. Contracts can have loopholes, and both can be open to interpretation... If that's what you desire out of them."

Ba'el's eyes, which had wandered upward toward the ceiling, slowly rolled back down and stared back at me. A toothy grin spread ear to ear across her face.

I continued with what I expected she wanted to hear, "Semantics, right?"

She laughed. Her cloven hooves kicked off the floor, and she rocked back but in perfect balance. Ba'el couldn't contain her joyous laughter while her chair was ready to break or tip backwards completely and send her flying to the floor. Instead, the chair's front legs slammed back down on the ground, her open palms slammed against the surface of the table and she leaped out of her chair to rest on her hands and knees on the table in front of me. Her face stopped just short of my own, a pair of burning green eyes with goat-like rectangular black pupils glared at me point blank.

"Exactly!"

I leaned backward in my own chair in reflex so that her forehead, or horns, didn't crack my skull open should they have been on a path to collide. My chair almost tipped over, and I had to flail my arms and legs to stop that from happening. Her tail swished in the air behind her excitedly. When she regained her composure, she scurried backward and dropped her butt back onto the chair on the other side of the table.

"That saves me so~ much time if I don't have to explain something that simple to you."

As I brought my chair back down, I decided to keep the pace going and ask, "And this matters because?-"

"Because? Because the Crone is the result of a desire of mine."

It was only now that I noticed something odd about her choice of words.

"You seem to know that witch from long ago. She couldn't have always been called the Crone... Has she?"

Ba'el took another swig while I talked.

"Nope," she said, with her mouth full and muffled by the bottle

No?

"What do you mean, 'nope'?"

She pulled the bottle away just long enough to answer clearly this time, "Don't remember. It's a common problem, actually."

Common? Memory loss? That's- I could feel my own heart

sunk. Memory loss... common? Really

Even the carefree Ba'el picked up on something. The expression on my face must have said it all. Perhaps my eyes had widened along with my shortness of breath. She placed the bottle more carefully on the table so it wouldn't make any sudden loud noises.

"What?" She asked me, more confused than concerned.

"Forgetting... H-how much did you forget?"

"For a time... everything," She replied.

So my situation wasn't unique. If it was a common phenomenon, then there had to be a reason behind it. If there was a reason behind it, then maybe there was something behind-

"Laven," She said sternly.

I caught on just then that my eyes were darting wildly inside my head. My composure had completely evaporated for an instant. There were beads of sweat on my forehead.

"There's something you're not telling me," She said accusingly. "I just told you some pretty heavy shit, so cough it up."

I took some deep breaths to get myself back under control, then I locked eyes with the demon's and met her dead serious expression.

"Nothing."

Ba'el stood up, her chair was sent flying backward across the room and crashed against the wall. Her head didn't hover that high above the table without, and she started to walk around it toward me.

"That's not the answer I want to hear. What are you hiding, little man?"

I'm dead. That was the thought that went through my mind when I saw her pissed off expression.

"Nothing! I don't remember anything either!" I screamed back.

She was already half way around the table when she stopped. Her angry expression gave way to surprise and then disbelief. She cocked one eyebrow and stared at me dubiously.

"You heard what the Crone said about me, right? That's all I know too. One day, about two months ago, I just woke up in some northern forest. I don't remember anything before that!"

"Two months?" She said, asking for confirmation.

"Yes. About that..." I replied weakly. "Y-you're saying you have the same problem, right? Then when did-"

"Ten years."

My heart thumped. Loud.

"W-what?"

"Ten years, Laven. I didn't remember anything for ten years

after I woke up."

My heart thumped again... A whole decade? Ten years to get my memories back? That would be ten years of my life's prime, gone. I don't have time for-

"At least not vividly," Ba'el continued; her words smashed my train of thought. "Even I remember having dreams and nightmares every so often... Even on the first night. Seeing places, people, things... All of them nonsensical, not always in order. Sometimes overlaid and on top of one another in a big heap... But they were there. And I eventually realized they were all real. Maybe it was just I couldn't pretend they were not real after a time. It just clicked into place once day... Real things that happened somewhere at some point in the past... The worst part is that they all happened to me... Or because of me... So, do you remember those dreams, Laven"

Dreams? Nightmares? I noticed Ba'el's mood became increasingly somber the longer she talked about these things she claimed to have been seeing every few nights without understanding what they were... Maybe it was more correct to say she tried not to understand them?

I didn't answer right away, but when it looked like she was ready to keep trotting toward me again in order to throttle me, I blurted out, "No. Not at all."

"Nothing?" She asked, not believing me.

"No! Nothing at all!" I yelled back, becoming defensive on reflex.

Ba'el studied me carefully with her eyes. She didn't seem to sense I was lying. I wasn't lying. I'm sure I would remember and certainly never forget any dream or nightmare if it gave me any hint at all to where I came from or why I was here. She turned her back, trotted away and returned with the chair she had thrown away. She placed it to the left of me, where she had just stormed towards me and stopped a moment ago. Her butt dropped back down into the seat, and the wooden legs groaned as she pulled herself back underneath the table.

"That doesn't sound like any ordinary amnesia I know of," Ba'el said. "Not the ordinary amnesia."

Her eyes narrowed as she studied me again. She was looking for any sign that I was pulling her leg.

"That kind of total memory blackout... I've only seen that happen to monsters."

My heart sunk.

"And you aren't that," She said assuredly. "No, definitely not... Not even an alp after the kind of stunt you pulled."

She cracked a smile. I felt a little relief that we hadn't gone so

far into dire straights.

"Then why are those blackouts in memories happening in the first place?" I asked.

"Because the old world is dying, Laven." Ba'el said, matter-of-factly. "The history of this world is split into eras. We're on the cusp of an old one. We're living during the time when it becomes another."

"I don't follow."

"Come on now, Laven," Ba'el said, rolling her eyes. "You got all the facts you need to put it all together. Monsters are more human now than they have ever been. One demoness got her claws on something. Something big that changed the rules of the game. It could have been used to start round two of the Great Extinction War, but it was used to do something different. Something unthinkable that has shaken this world to its core."

Great Extinction War? Does that involve The Battle of Celreulian I remember hearing all the other girls talk about?

"It doesn't take a genius to put one and one together. This new Demon Lord, Master of Monsters, is forcing man and monster together. I'm not sure if the answer is two, positive, negative, something bigger or smaller that comes out the other end... But it's happening. Unless something changes, the last forty years have told me one thing: it can't be stopped."

I was speechless. I didn't know what to think. If it was something unthinkable to me, then it was indeed something pretty damn serious that got messed with. The demon continued.

"Humans have been spreading out and reclaiming lands they lost in the last war a thousand years ago. Lands all sorts of people had to flee or be butchered in so long ago. They were taking them back with no problems for centuries. Then the new Demon Lord's guerrilla war began and, after only a few decades, ended suddenly—even I don't know why—but not before it left pockets of monsters behind. Demon realms where monsters roam, live free and breed with the men they capture, romance and seduce. Humanity wasn't deterred for long. It knew it had to expand or die, so it did just that. Continuing expanding. They dare not flirt with the demon realms. Those places pulse with magic energies which can have an insidious effect on the minds and bodies of men and women. They are filling the spaces in-between. That means the growth and migration of humans is constrained... Controlled. Guided... It's like the channels of water, the irrigation in The Marches; water flowing through pre-dug ditches. No matter how fast that water flows, or how free it thinks it is to do so; it can't escape those paths dug for it. Humans are going to fall into that same trap. It's inevitable."

Ba'el's face glowed with a sinister delight while she talked. She

must think the scenario was so perfect, so deliciously full of tragedy and hubris. For a demon such as her, it must be just what the doctor ordered.

I was still skeptical, so I kept on her, “You sound pretty fired up over it. Aren't you supposed to be retired? Where are you going with this?”

“Think Laven. All of this has happened over the last century and a half. Do you believe that there exists no monster older than that? You've traveled quite a bit in such a short time; no doubt you've seen a lot of things. Tell me, have you seen the genocidal, vicious monsters of old that I remember? No, you haven't. Their minds have been altered. The rage, bloodlust and hunger that consumed them has been replaced with another kind of emotion, another kind of lust and hunger. Of course their memories from those times would be taken from them. It would torture them if they weren't. They've been twisted. I don't think they've been twisted for the worse, but they have been changed and not always willingly. But the power of the new Demon Lord cannot be denied. She has become something even greater than the Demon Warlord who led the Great Extinction War... She has become like a god. A god who dares call herself by the same name as the mother of all demons... Lilith... No one knows exactly who she was before. I've only been able to hear bits of information here and there over the years, but the part of the story that always repeats is that she was a nobody. This new demon lord was just a lowly succubus from a far flung, dank and forgotten corner of all the hells. I do not know the details, nor have I ever seen her or felt her presence, but she is someone who somehow gained a power beyond the imagination of the warring demon princes who were left alive in the aftermath of the last Demon Lord's death a thousand years ago. The crown they all fought for—which would decide the next demon lord—was taken out from under them. It happened faster than any of them could process. A meager succubus broke their backs, broke their pride, broke their minds. She reshaped their souls and turned those terrible demons with faces, maws, horns, muscles and forms which could crush an ordinary man's soul into dust with ease into what she was. It wasn't long till their line of thinking matched her own. The lesser demons could not hope to resist. They soon followed their masters, and old hells died. The Demon Lord, Master of Monsters, soon spread her will on the monsters, and the terrible beasts and savage demihumans of old, died... Possibly forever.”

Ba'el leaned toward me, her elbow on the table, her mouth approaching closer to my ear. She whispered softly into it while I sat there overwhelmed by her story.

“...And I'm glad.”

“Do you have a choice?” I asked with a shaky voice and trembling lip.

“I don't have that many memories before I woke up. Those that I have are like reading chapters and excepts from a book about me that I did not write. I only know they are mine because the facts all line up, and I can't deny it with reason. I can only accept it... Hey, tell me, Laven. What did you know about demons before?”

I wasn't sure if that was a rhetorical question; one that I was allowed to get right or wrong, and she'd go on, or one I absolutely needed to answer correctly. My mind wandered back to what Shoshanah had lectured about days earlier.

“S-something about taking men's souls,” I replied after a long pause.

“That's right,” Ba'el replied. “That's how it was before. Souls were the ultimate renewable energy source. Heavy souls sink down into hell and fall like rain drops on those living there. More falls the lower you go. Demons fight and rip each other apart to feed on them and torture them. When they have had everything that made them heavy beaten out of them, they rise back up. Then they are reborn, and it probably happens to them again after only a century, usually far sooner than that. Fighting other demons for table scraps isn't the only way though. Making deals and contracts with mortals in exchange for their souls was popular. Offering services, gifts, wishes, magic in return. When they die, their soul is yours to twist for nourishment like water from a wet rag. When it's dry, and whatever person that soul used to be has been obliterated, it returns to the cycle of life. That's how demons lived for countless eons.”

“How you lived?” I asked, while my own hand was starting to shake a little.

“Yes. I specialized in gifting magic power in exchange for the souls and loyalty of humans... It is from the meddling of my kind, the baphomet; one of the seventy-two families of demons, that witches are born. I was a Duke of my own realm. I was summoned and wandered the world to grow my followers. I would then wring their souls to sustain myself and grow even more powerful... But... You could also say I was a hermit. I had other desires and interests.”

These were dangerous and frightening things I heard from this little demon girl. My heart had been beating fast, and I was on a primal level terrified for my own safety. But her sudden change in expression... It unnerved me. I felt a pang of sympathy for a moment. Her expression seemed pained.

“So you wanted to know who and what the Crone is? Who she was? Well, here's you answer: she was an experiment of mine. She was just a girl, a lonely girl with circumstances I don't even

remember. Unlike many other demons, who simply take, often without thought or care, I spent time with humans. I tried to understand them, study them. I had to. If I wanted to know what they wanted and spot who was willing to make a deal with their soul for power; I had to understand them. If I didn't, I would starve. Some upstart would come for my life and land when I was weak. They'd kill me, but the stronger I got, the hungrier I got... I noticed something though. I noticed humans also had hunger and interests, but they would set them aside. They would help one another, give up and risk each other for others. You would never see a demon help another. Altruism does not further one's own desires, so it never happens. I saw it often with humans though. Of course they were violent, of course they were capable of evil but they were not ruled by their desires. They broke their oaths, and they tried to betray their contracts all the time. Demons can do none of those things... Perhaps I wanted to know what that felt like, just once. So I took a human, a lonely girl, and gave her so much power, power enough to be a demon in her own right."

Now Ba'el's lip started to twitch.

"It was good, for a time. I began to wonder if this kind of bond we shared was what I had seen humans share while I had watched them from the shadows for generations. She lived far longer than the other witches I had created. The time for me to harvest her soul never came. I believed I had stumbled upon creating something remarkable. She didn't seem like she would ever die. I'm sure as she withered and grew older, she was not what you would consider beautiful, but she persisted, and I was never far away. Her life required that she must sacrifice others, and that number grew as the decades went on. That was when I realized I had made a mistake. I had created something not human but not quite demon either. She hungered; she was greedy, possessive, demanding. I came to realize she had lost everything that I thought I had seen in humans... Then the Great Extinction War came. I had witnessed Demon Lords rise and fall before. I am one of the few last forth generation of demons. It was just before my time when the original families still wandered the plains of all the hells. But never had I seen a bigger and more vicious army of demons and monsters be gathered together for one purpose. It wreaked havoc on the world... Ulrik'el'Shemsalar... that was his name. At least that's what you can pronounce in mortal tongue. You'll never see that name in any of your human books... He was different. He was powerful, too powerful. His words were commands. When he said to lay waste to the world of men... I could not ignore the clarion call. All the witches I had raised, I sent them to war. They were discovered and burned. I savagely created more, by force if I had to. I killed and raped my way through the world of men along with so many other demons. It

was as if my mind had been forced to the back, and a primal beast, a dog, had been put in control. I could do nothing but bark whenever Ulrik'el'Shemsalar demanded. But he was eventually defeated like all the others were. When he was, the monsters scattered; the demons who survived fled back to the hellish plains. They soon began to fight one another to see who would become the next Demon Lord. A cycle they could not escape. I was lucky enough to be one of the few remaining nobles, but I could not understand why I was the only one to feel horrified and violated at what happened... I could not afford to ask questions though. I would no doubt be a target or spurred onward by others to take my claim... I refused... I... Don't want to... to talk about those times..."

Ba'el's expression seemed much like my own a few moments ago. She was deeply troubled by the thoughts and memories bouncing around inside that little head of hers. She hastily reached for the bottle of moonshine. She titled her head back and let the rest of the contents of the bottle slide down her throat. She nearly coughed when she looked back down and slammed the bottle back on the table. She did it so hard; cracks in the bottle nearly spread far enough to shatter it completely. A rough cough erupted from her mouth for a moment; but even then, she didn't seem tipsy or flushed at all. Whatever was in there, probably pure proof alcohol fermented and aged for decades, didn't affect her at all.

She wished it would.

"So I turned my back on it all. I didn't want to go through that again. As far as demons go, I wasn't so violent by nature. Sure, hundreds... thousands of humans... I brought them into my Sabbath; I filled their short lives with magic and wonder. Yes, I tricked them, manipulated their feelings and made them drunk with desire with pleasure, then I took my reward, their souls, when they died. That's just what demons did. But never.... never before did I do anything like that accursed Demon Lord forced me to do... Forced me to do it with a smile with a feeling of twisted joy in my heart. I'd rather not feel like that ever again. So I left. I found a place to hide and sleep while a civil war raged all around me. I slept for nearly a thousand years. I don't know why I woke up forty years ago, but when I did wake up, when my memories finally returned to me... I slowly pieced together what had happened. What had happened to me, the changes that happened to the world... to demon-kind... to monster-kind... My heart felt at ease, different, changed, but I wasn't troubled by that. Not like how it was before... What troubled me were the memories, the dreams and nightmares. I've learned to live with those; it wasn't easy, but I did it... Now I have one last nightmare left... I'm just an old relic from an obsolete era, but something I made... Someone I made... Is going to

wreak havoc. I have hope for this world now. This new world doesn't deserve the fate the Crone will let loose upon it. I have to end itThe Crone must be stopped. When I saw her, listened to her, I saw that she hasn't accepted this new world. I have to stop her. Then... That is when the shadows of the past which I helped create can be put to rest... Then I peacefully put myself to rest."

Ba'el's small and flat chest heaved up and down. She had finally knocked the wind out of herself. Her breathing was raspy, but she was unable to cure that since she had emptied that one bottle in a single go. She looked back down at the table, pulling her eyes away from me at last. I could still see the green orbs in my mind's eye. They had been so bright they were now burned into it. She appeared dejected, troubled.

"Why do I still remember it now? Why couldn't I forget it all like everyone else!?"

Once again, there was nothing but silence. I languished there on my seat and tried to make sense of it all. Do demons cry? Can they? I imagine if she could, she would right now. Maybe I'm just projecting too much of myself onto her. Perhaps she already has and no longer has any tears to shed after all these years. Ba'el has spent the last few decades trying to forget. Is that why she hid herself away in the abbey and tried to be someone else?

"Why would you tell me all that?" I asked, genuinely lost.

Ba'el sighed, "Dammit. Now I went too far. Even you're worried now..." She admonished herself, but that didn't stop her from answering, "Those are just thoughts and feelings I've kept locked up inside for decades now. They were just waiting for the first chance they got to spill out in front of someone who would listen and not try to put my head on a pike for revealing who I actually am... Think of it as a confession."

"And how am I supposed to help you stop the Crone? If you can't do it yourself, why do you need my help? What difference would whatever I can do make?"

"You already are. Since her witches have yet to find us, you've done the first part brilliantly by just sitting there with that stupid look on your face. When it comes time to stop her ritual, just interfere and ruin enough of her circles while I keep her and the cronies busy. Kick some of their lines in the dirt or something. If your unique ability to mess with magic is worth anything, it will screw with it enough to shut the whole thing down."

"You're going to take them on all alone?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"That's insane."

She sat back upright in her chair and threw me an annoyed

looked, “I don't want to hear that from the suicidal man who wandered into a den of witches, alone, with nothing but a dress on.”

I shook my head, “Not alone. I got backup coming.”

Ba'el tilted her head, stared at me and mumbled, “...What?”

“I'm the bait. Even the Crone knew it when she brought up my friends earlier. I don't think there's anything she can do to prepare for that storm. She has to be rushing to get everything in order now... She must have wanted me caught and dealt with above everything else. We're not the only ones on the defensive and a tight schedule. Wherever they took us, they'll follow and track me down. When they catch up, we'll tear this place apart... If they can find me...”

The demon held her chin in her claw and went deep into thought.

“T-that is if they can follow us here. I'm not sure what kind of trail they-”

“I left one...” She said under her breath. “A big one.”

Now it was my turn to raise an eyebrow.

“What? When?”

“You didn't notice? Did you really believe after everything you've seen tonight, that they would have noticed you and brought you along on purpose?” She thrust her thumb into her chest for dramatic effect as she declared, “I brought you here. It was me all along.”

Wait... The green. The green pentagrams before we fell through the floor. The odd green space I fell through from the abbey. That was her all along.

“I wasn't subtle about it at all,” She said with a grin.

If that's true, then that means the other will- Hold up! I stood up suddenly from my chair, and it fell over, toppling over with a crash. I thrust my finger accusingly at her.

“Wait! If that's true... When you fell in after me on top of my-!”

She shrugged her shoulders and raised her paws into the air. The demon had a clever little smirk on her face that she was trying to suppress too. I glared back at her while I ground my teeth together. I had to look away before my anger boiled over.

“Make sure you don't blow something,” she taunted. “We got time till the Crone makes her next move. Your friends got until tomorrow night to show up, or we're going in regardless. Until then... There is one more thing you must help me with.”

'Must?'

I was a bit worried by the tone and choice of words, so I asked, “What are you-?”

I didn't really need to ask. She had already bounced back from her melancholy. It was as if she hadn't hit a low point at all in the past

thirty minutes. She had also bounced and scooted her chair closer to where I had been sitting down before. I didn't even notice it because she did it so gradually, but she was sitting right beside me, looking up now. Looking up with a... seductive look on her face. I felt my heart skip a beat.

“Did you forget? We still need to make preparations. I'll need your help to get ready for when I face off with the Crone. You're not going to just ignore your responsibility are you? I had to use up the last bit of magic I kept hidden for forty years to save you life... She's had a lot more time and freedom to acquire... reserves than I have. I won't even stand a chance unless I catch up.”

Every corner of my mind quietly screamed inside. A hundred different voices throwing their arms up in a panic for a countless number of different reasons.

Chapter 77

I would dare claim the worst feeling imaginable is that sinking feeling in your chest after realizing you've stumbled into a trap, yet you are stuck in that moment just before resigning yourself to your fate. A feeling of helplessness, suspended in time, but the sun has yet to set. You can still delude yourself a little longer that there is hope. The gallows are finished, but you might yet receive a pardon at the eleventh hour. Like a prison cell with a small window, smaller than your head, at the top of the cell which lets the sunlight in. It makes you forget about the iron bars behind you for a time.

No good deed should go unrewarded, so I always thought. Good men don't remain behind bars for long. My life was saved by the demon, so I saved hers. It seemed like a simple exchange. At least that's how I looked back on it. I really shouldn't think so highly of myself. I did it only because the sight of a little girl drowning is something I couldn't live with. A naive sentiment. A knee jerk reaction to the demon I've repeatedly underestimated. If she wasn't concerned about hitting the ground at terminal velocity, she probably wasn't afraid of drowning either. According to Ba'el, I hadn't yet settled the outstanding balance.

She only saved me because it was necessary to keep her hidden from the Crone and her goon's magical eyes. For a creature who works in absolutes of contracts and, by extension, exchanges, I should have realized every tidbit of knowledge that was coming my way came at a price. She had said it herself. We both had the same end goal, even if our reasons approaching it were different.

Her seat had migrated from one end of the table right next to me, and when I realized it, I leaped up and backed away. The demon's green eyes were sultry, but when I resisted their pull I soon realized everything was all wrong. A girl whose head barely reached my chest glared coquettishly at me, and I retreated instinctively. I've ceased being numb to this kind of atmosphere and where this kind of scenario escalates to.

Preparations and reserves were two loaded words she used with those eyes and grin of hers, and I wasn't about to let myself get swept up in it all. Except I might have already screwed myself. Between the door and myself was the demon.

It didn't take her long to pry those eyes away from me and look over her shoulder. She didn't need much time to make sense of it either. Ba'el hoped off the chair; her cloven hooves clopping loudly in the deathly silent room. She backed up, watching me intently. There was a tool cabinet nearby, so she spun around quickly, dug her claws into it and lifted it off the ground. She didn't even need to put her legs,

hips or back into it. She dead lifted it with only her arms, spun around and dropped it in front of the door. Hundreds of pounds without effort. The rattle of heavy iron tool inside jingled and the wooden frame came down with one last clunk. Someone had covered up that little window, and now the cell was dark.

She clapped and rubbed her palms together, “Almost forget to put a lock on the door. If they do find us, don't want them barging in all of a sudden.” She said with a smile.

I had my doubts that was the reason.

With a playful pirouette, she spun on around on her hoof and faced me. One hoof in front of the other, slowly as though she were walking in high heels, Ba'el walked closer. Slowly. I backed away and kept the table between us as she circled around the opposite side.

“Why so coy, Laven?” She giggled.

There wasn't a word I knew to properly respond to the demon. I couldn't even look at her anymore when her paw reached for the metal bits coiling from behind her back to barely cover her chest. I heard the sound of a click, and I quickly looked away. When I heard the clang of metal against the ground I looked back on reflex and saw the demon's bare chest, complete with her barely noticeable mounds crowned with red nickel sized-

I threw my gaze away violently and continued to use the table to shield myself from her, using the sound of her voice and the clopping of her hooves to guide me away. Eventually her giggles stopped and were replaced with sighs.

“Laven. Stop playing around.” She said coldly.

I dared to look back, but only after tilting my chin up so that my eyes would have a harder time seeing below her collarbone. Ba'el's brows were wrinkled, and her eyes were piercing and altogether on the verge of anger.

“P...P-put your clothes back on,” I managed to say at last.

If you could call it clothes.

“Put what back on?” She said with a grin.

Her fingers reached slowly for the brooch holding her mantle around her neck and shoulders. With a flick of her nail, it snapped open, and it dropped to the floor behind her. Now she was just messing around.

“Oh? That?” She said with faux innocence. “How silly of me.”

Ba'el turned around and bent down to pick up the pile of clothes behind her. I had to avert my eyes again when her rear end and fluffy goat's tail, which flicked back and forth playfully, was all I could see of her above the table. She giggled for a bit but suddenly stopped. I heard her sigh, and when I looked back she was glaring at me, twice

as irritated compared to before. Ba'el's chin was resting on the table as she stared at me. Her forehead was now properly knitted into angry glare.

"Laaaaaven~" She complained. "This is serious."

"Serious?" I blurted out. "Serious how? You're the one messing around!"

"Hmph," She snorted. "We only got till tonight to get ready, and I'm running on fumes."

I heard another click and clank of metal on the stone floor from across and under the table. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. A screech of wood against stone echoed in the cave, and the table itself scurried across the floor toward me. The edge of the wooden table struck me in the thigh, nearly knocked me off my feet, pushed me back and painfully pinched the muscles and bones in my leg. I was a mouse caught in a trap. The wall which had once been a safe distance behind me was now against my back.

Like a chanteuse, Ba'el pulled herself on top of the table and crawled across it on all fours toward me. She was also completely naked with a sultry expression on her face, running her tongue over her lips. My heart skipped a beat... in a panic.

"It didn't have to come to this, Laven. But you're being a very naughty boy."

Sitting down on her knees with her hooves behind her, Ba'el's crawl came to an end. She reached out with her paws and ran her fingers and nails over my cheek, down my neck and to my chest. With one sharp nail, she effortlessly sliced through each string and button holding my shirt together. The pads of her paws rubbed slowly over my chest, and she seemed to be testing and teasing it for where it was firm, soft or sensitive. My hands were stuck down at my sides, trapped by the table, so I couldn't defend myself against her at all. I also couldn't look down because of the small body of the girl laid bare before me. Until I felt a finger tweak my right nipple, and my arm jolted on its own and rattled the table. I swung my head around and flared my teeth in anger against the scamp.

"Oh ho~ That's a good spot," She giggled.

"Stop this Ba'el," I growled.

"Stop? Why? We haven't even gotten to the fun part yet."

"Weren't you just-"

A fuzzy finger pressed up against my lips to shut me up.

"Are you stupid, or do you just do a good job pretending you are when you want to play the ignorance card?"

What is she-?

"I'm dangerously low on magic. I need life force to replenish it."

Ba'el rose up off the table and pressed her chest up against my mine. Her chin rested on my shoulder. I could feel her heartbeat. I could feel her breathing right next to my ear.

She whispered into it, “Your life force.”

With her arms wrapped around my neck she leaned back and hung off me, far enough away so that she could study my face and the expression I made when she said it. The cruel and wicked look on her when she did so told me that she got what she wanted out of that.

“You said you knew a thing or two about demons, right? I told you some privy stuff too. Well, that's what I need now.”

She looked left, right and around the room.

“-And I don't see anyone else around. Do you?... Hey. You do know what has a real good and dense place to get life force, right?”

Ba'el pulled herself back in while I was still powerless to do a thing and brought her face to the side my neck. I felt something wet and slimy trace over my skin there followed by something soft nibbling at the skin and playfully gnawing and sucking, but then I felt something sharp sink itself in my skin. It felt like a bee's stinger, and my body convulsed in protest.

Ba'el giggled as she leaned back again, a little trickle of blood running down from one corner of her lip. Her teeth, the two large upper canines in particular, were dyed red.

“That's one, but I don't like it too much to be honest. Makes your partner woozy. They pass out, and I don't like the idea of breaking my toys... Not like that, anyways.”

Even with her mouth now away from my neck, I could still feel a tiny trickle of liquid flow from my neck. When I looked down, I saw meager little stream of red cascade down my shoulder and over my chest. After the initial sting and shock, I glared even more fiercely at the demon.

“Hey. What starts life? That's an easy riddle. Come on. Tell me, Laven.”

I kept my mouth shut in quiet rebellion.

Ba'el puffed out her cheeks and pouted, “Awwww~ Come on. It's easy. It's the seed. Yeah. THAT seed.”

Another giggle as the little demon played around while I couldn't do so much as lift a finger.

“Back off, Ba'el,” I finally managed to grumble.

“What? Why? You got a better idea? I doubt it. If you want to stop the Crone, I need to get my strength back. You're the only one who can do that right now, so shut up and play along.”

Ba'el's face was a mix between playful and irritated, but when she took a moment to study my face, her own expression lightened.

“You're serious?” She said in disbelief.

Her expression quickly switched back to angry

"What's your problem?" She yelled, untying her hands around my neck so that she could grab me by the collar of my shirt and shake my back and forth.

She let go of my collar, slumped back down on the table but still continued to glare at me.

"What? You got someone else on your mind?... Nah... You got 'friends' plural, don't ya? So what's the deal? I ain't good enough?"

What the hell is she?-

Ba'el stood up, which forced me to look away lest something be right about at my eye level.

"I got assets of my own you know."

She turned around, put her hands on her hips; and while standing on the table right in front of me with my eyes only half a meter away, she rocked her hips in a rhythm back and forth in front of me. Her little goat's tail nearly brushed and tickled against my nose as she did her little dance. She emphasized it with a couple slaps of her paws against her bare buttocks. She peered over her shoulder at me, but the look I gave back to her, or her backside, wasn't what she was looking for. She stopped her little dance, crashed back down onto her knees as she spun around and this time violently seized my cheeks in her hands and forced me to look at her.

"What's the deal?" She yelled at me; her frustration having runneth over. "This old lady not good enough for ya? Huh? Punk?"

Hold on.

"Ooo wady?" I said, barely, with my cheeks and lips painfully squished together.

"You ageist, you little shit?

"Wha?"

I was lost now. This interrogation had gone off the rails somewhere else along the way. When Ba'el released her death grip on my face, and I could speak clearly, I had to ask:

"Ageist? Just what kind of age are we talking about here?"

"Twelve-"

My heart sank, and my conscious was about to feel vindicated-

"-thousand," Ba'el said, with a hint of pride.

That's-

"A proud card carrying member of the forth generation of demons. Didn't I already say that? Only once separated from the great families of the Seventy-two!"

I could feel my own face twist into a deadpan expression. Ba'el was puffing up full of pride; her twin-tail hair thankfully dangling PG in front of her chest so I was free to stare at her in disbelief. She went silent after a moment and stared back at me. We didn't move or speak

for a small while, but then she suddenly exploded back into action on her own.

"Hold on! What the hell are you thinking?" She said, thrusting her finger in front of my face. "Don't tell me you- all this time you've been- like a child!"

Well, isn't that obvious?

"Yeah, that's because you look like one!" I barked back.

"How dare you! You little whelp of a mortal!"

Ba'el stood up again, this time with one hand on her hip, the other behind her head while she gyrated her hips back and forth.

"You dare insult my gorgeous body, overflowing with youth?"

As she thrust her hips and groin in my face I had to look away.

"S-stop that!" I stuttered back at her.

I wasn't the only one freaking out now.

"You're beyond naughty. You've gone completely vile!" She screamed back. "I'll show you-"

Between my legs I felt something roughly cup and hold my loins. Ba'el callously thrust her hand between my thighs and was about to start juggling the contents in her fingers when I finally reached my breaking point. I heard an audible snap in my head, and my hands, which had been at my sides, grabbed hold of the table's edge. With all my strength and some borrowed muscle, I flipped the table over. It didn't matter that Ba'el was on top of it; she didn't weight that much to stop me from doing so. She yelped in surprise and rode it through its short trip airborne. A couple meters away she hit the ground, and the table fell on top of her.

After the crash, I stood there breathing heavily for a moment. My throat was hoarse; the muscles in my arm and back were already starting to ache when the adrenaline left me quickly. My senses came back eventually, and it only sunk in what I had just done. The shadows from the lamp had suddenly shifted, the atmosphere and very identity of the room itself changed along with it. Ba'el was nowhere to be seen, the only hiding place would be under the table now flat on its top with its legs sticking high up into the air.

Before I could try to cobble together an apology, the ground itself felt like it was rumbling. With just one flick of her arm, Ba'el threw the table off herself and sent it flying into the wall. I watched as it shattered into splinters in the corner of the room. All the excitement and adrenaline which had steeled my heart began to melt when I could physically see the dark aura and pulses of negative energy exude off the naked baphomet.

"La-ve-n~" She growled while slowly getting back up.

I tried to get away, but there was only a wall behind me. The door, my only other exit, had a few hundred kilograms of wooden

cabinet and iron tools blocking the doorway.

"Well... Like they always say... If you want something done right... You need to do it yourself."

There was a shadow covering Ba'el's face, so I couldn't gauge both the tone of her voice and the expression on her face. Not until it was too late. She looked up, and as the shadow slid across and off her face, I saw her eyes had become glowing green pentagrams which were busy spinning and pulsing. My own eyes felt like they were burning, melting, when I looked into hers, and a buzz inside my head felt like my brain was being shaken to mush. I almost lost my balance and keeled over, but my vision went dark before that.

It felt as though a burlap sack had been dunked over my head. Everything had gone pitch black, even the light from the lamp couldn't pierce the darkness. I saw not even the faint red glow through one's eyelids while in the shining sunlight.

First came the ringing. A low annoying buzz that started from the center of my head until it reached my ears and flew off in all directions only to echo off the close walls and back toward the center of my pulsing head where the aching migraine got worse and worse before it started to get better. Second came sight, it gradually and slowly came back to me, but the woozy feeling from my inner ears never quite left. It made feel as though I were off balance all the time, and I could barely stand at all.

"Aha. There we go," I said.

Except... I didn't say anything. The voice was... distant, yet still near.

I looked over to where the noise had come from, and I saw... myself, standing by the wall. With one hand on my head pulling my head down to my shoulder, until it let out a crack, then pushed to the other shoulder until it cracked again.

An out of body experience? No. That's not-

"What the hell is-" I heard Ba'el say.

Only it didn't come from far away, I heard it close. Real close. I could feel my throat hum as she spoke. My hands reached up for my throat, and I felt something fuzzy grasp me. I looked down and saw fuzzy paws and inhuman arms from the elbow down. I watched the paws in front of my eyes shake and clench into fists over and over again each time I wished them to do so. A feeling of nausea hit me hard; a phantom pain washed over them. Three fingers, one thumb. Each digit ending with sharp claws and the callous skin forming pads on the palm and distal. Not a pinky to be seen, but I still felt it there, hovering in the thin air, invisible.

I looked over to the other side of the room where I was standing. I was looking this way with... No. Those are not my eyes.

Sitting in the sockets of what was my face were green eyes with goat-like rectangular pupils. Spreading across my face was a familiar and wicked grin.

The pair of paws started patting all over myself. They grabbed hold of the sides of my head where I felt the pain from a pair of goat ears being pulled taut. A pair of large curved horns attached firmly on the top of my head along with two large inhuman skulls which felt about just as large as my own head right now. It didn't matter how hard I pulled; they didn't come loose; it actually hurt a bit to even try.

"Once again, you're really close," I heard myself say.

I turned my gaze toward the far wall where I saw my body standing.

"W-what did you-"

I had a hard time talking. A chipper little girl's voice, Ba'el's voice, came out from my throat every time I tried to talk. Every time I started talking it felt like she was trying to shout over me, and I kept stopping, thinking I was being interpreted.

"...What did you do?"

"Just a little demonic possession, nothing serious," I heard my voice say.

"Ba'el?" I gasped.

"Neat huh?" My body said, eyes wide with excitement. "Pretty standard stuff... Oh. You might be wondering why you're- Well, I thought it wouldn't be fun if I just left that husk lying around doing nothing. When I took over your body I put your mind in my body. For safe keeping."

That's not possible. That's... absurd.

I took a step backward, and I heard a clop. I looked down and saw Ba'el's naked body and her cloven hooves at the end of her legs beneath the fuzzy silver and brown fur that covered the legs from the knees down. When I looked down, there was Ba'el's tiny chest and meager breasts. Tucked between the legs was... nothing at all. I panicked. Instinct kicked in before reason; I tried fleeing, but the clop of each hoof didn't stop, and I lost my balance quickly. When Ba'el's body hit the ground, butt first then sprawled on her back, it didn't hurt at all. It did knock the wind out of me for a moment though.

"Interesting thing, isn't it?" I heard my voice call out. "Walking in someone else's shoes."

While I heard my voice laugh at its own poor joke, I pulled Ba'el's body off the ground. I crawled backward until I reached the cabinet blocking the door... Wait. If I control her body right now, then...

Ba'el's body wobbled back onto its hooves at my command, and her paws at my guidance grabbed hold of the wooden box with reckless abandon. I strained and struggled, commanded and shouted

inside my head, but the box did not move. It didn't even budge. With every heave and grunt, my own laughter got louder.

Before I realized it, my own body was towering over me. Ba'el's body went still, and I turned my gaze up. That familiar and twisted grin was looking down at me, along with those green eyes of Ba'el's dancing around inside my head. When my hand reached toward me, I tried to swat it away, but it didn't do a thing. A man's hand grabbed hold of Ba'el by the upper arm and then, without the slightest effort, tossed Ba'el's body airborne toward the other side of the room.

There wasn't enough time to let a scream out. I was too confused, too lost and too dazed to do it, and Ba'el's body didn't even do it on its own. I felt the shaking impact as my consciousness crashed into the wall, but there was a distinct lack of pain. There was without a doubt a smash. Dust and pieces of stone rained down, and cracks appeared in the wall. When I finally peeled off the wall, I collapsed on top of a pile of old straw and feathers wrapped in an old mattress that let out an atomic plume of old dust. There was a tiny dainty and girly sounding cough that escaped through my mouth.

“Confused?” I heard my voice say. “There's another saying, yes? Home is where the heart is, right?”

I swatted the plumes of dust away, and through the gray and particles floating about I saw my body jabbing its thumb into the middle of its chest.

“You don't think all that strength of mine comes from those little arms, do you? No. All that comes right from the spirit. My form might have changed, my memories may have been taken from me and other parts of my psyche twisted with quirks... But my spirit is still the same. This body is that of a little girl's now, but I'm every bit the old daemon I was all along. Strength, magic, all of it. Even the Demon Lord, Lilith, couldn't take that away from me... You see; we had just had our spirits switch, but I carried everything that was me along for the ride. I left nothing but my new little girl's body behind.”

“Why would you-?”

“Stop asking boring questions, Laven. You already know why. I need your life force. I'm a demon. I need it to keep my strength up. To fuel my magic. We don't stand a chance tonight unless I get my fill... If you're not going to do it. Then I will.”

I watched as Ba'el inside my body slipped one arm free from my shirt's sleeve, then the other. It collapsed into a heap of cloth behind... me. Ba'el... My head is spinning as I begin to lose track of and- can't focus...

“Do I have to spell it out? Life force. Seed... We're going to do it now. Butter the bread. Take the meat wagon out for a spin.... Sex.... It didn't have to be this difficult... I'm going to get to work now.

We only got a few hours to get 'er done."

"No. You can't!" I shouted defiantly with Ba'el's voice.

"Relax. This is only just a step beyond your daring infiltration of the Abbey."

"I didn't choose to do that!"

"What a coincidence!" She declared joyously with my voice and with a grin across my face while throwing my arms up into the air. "You don't get to choose what happens now either!"

"Ba'el stop. This is crazy," I pleaded.

"Gonna be crazy fun!" She responded, twisting my face into an almost insane expression of wide mouthed glee. "Do you have any idea what it feels like to be in cold storage for about eight-hundred years, then spend forty years of it cooped up inside a tiny little room like Isabelle? It's like being forced to tuck your knees in, wrap your arms around them and be shoved into a tiny box. For Forty. Damn. Years. I couldn't stretch; I couldn't go wild. The only company I had were children, old coots and everything from boring old men to creepy and disgusting old men... Now excuse me if I let go and dig my claws into the first worthwhile thing to pass by within arm's reach in a millennium."

"Lift this spell then, and I'll-"

"Oh ho ho ho ho... No..." Ba'el laughed. "We're past that point now. No returns. You had your chance. You had to go and hurt my feelings. I spent all those years disguised as a child, then you go ahead and continue to treat me like one after everything you've seen and heard. No. No, we're doing this the hard way now... Speaking of hard."

Ba'el, in full control of my body, reached down for the belt loop of my pants and pulled them back while looking down. I felt my mind jolt and shudder. A strong feeling of violation overwhelmed me.

"Hot damn!..." Ba'el shouted with my voice.

Ba'el's green eyes turned back to look at me, a wry smile on my face.

"This IS gonna be good. Not shabby. Not bad at all."

"Don't you even-!"

"-And you've been sporting a chubby this whole time too. Now I'm really cross," She said with a smile. The tone in my voice was hardly angry too. "We could have saved a lot of time if you had just listened to your little soldier here... Oh well, that's in the past now. I'll just have to teach you a lesson about respecting your elders so this doesn't happen again."

Ba'el released the grip on the belt, and the pants snapped back around my body's waist.

"I take it you got a problem doing it with beautiful, cute and

precocious demons like me, well....”

Ba'el dropped the pants to the floor, exposing my now naked body to the air. It was standing at attention in more ways than one. There was an insidious grin slapped across my face, and there was a mischievous glint in the black rectangular pupils of her eyes which were inside my skull.

“...I certainly don't.”

Ba'el moved closer with my body, nude. Saying that my feelings were complicated over everything would be an understatement. I had progressed from having to accept my fate in that dark cell to being transferred to a new, smaller one. Only I had to share that cell with someone else with certain... inclinations.

I did my best to back away, but there was wall behind me; and without Ba'el's own strength in this body, it was just the body of a little girl. I wasn't any taller than my own chest now. Shorter legs, shorter arms, hooves for feet, and my mind was still not adjusted to everything. There was no way I could move fast enough to my left, right, nor forward to get away from Ba'el. All I could do was cower and shake my head in vain for her to stop. I didn't even have full control of this body's faculties, and I still had the odd sensation of things that should be there but were not. There was also the sensation of feelings things now where they were not before. That was what really caused me to freak out.

She was on top of me and with right leg and left arm. I was trapped on top of the bed and against the wall. Ba'el shifted my own body's hips until I was on the other end of an old friend. An old standby that had had gone turncoat. My head was still fuzzy, but even when I closed my eyes, I could smell it. When I tried to hold my breath, I felt it. I could feel as Ba'el slid the glans and shaft of my penis against her own cheeks. I shuddered at the thought and so did Ba'el's body of its own accord.

“Come on now, Laven. Be a sport.” Ba'el said with my voice. “Don't make this go on any longer than it has to. Oh, and do be careful; this is your body after all. You better remember that before you start getting ideas.”

With one hand on the base of the shaft, I felt her swing it back and forth. I could feel it smack against Ba'el's cheek. She then switched to the other side. A profound sense of humiliation overwhelmed me. I could feel the rush of red and heat in her body's cheeks, and I wasn't sure if it was my embarrassment... Or that her body was getting turned on...

With my hands, Ba'el grabbed hold of the horns I could feel on the top of my head. Like a battering ram, I could feel the tip of my own cock trying to force its way into her mouth. All I could do was clench

her teeth down hard and stubbornly refuse. There is only so much humiliation I could stand. I could not bear Ba'el's sick and twisted punishment going any further. So I kept my eyes closed, my mouth shut and I hoped the sound of grunts coming from my original body, which were turning into exasperated sighs, would mean the end of all this.

"Hey. Laven," Ba'el said, callously. "Open sesame."

I felt the bed shift. The leg which Ba'el had been using to pin me down, moved between... Her original body's legs, and I could feel my mind turn over and her body shake.

"!!!"

The control I had over her body slackened for just a moment. A toe, which Ba'el controlled, rubbed against the privates of Ba'el down below, right over and pressing down on the little red bead. There was a delay. Her little body jolted against my will for a moment; my mind didn't even register. A gasp escaped through the lips; I could feel the fresh air for just a moment before something foreign was shoved inside, and I had trouble breathing. Long, thick, hot. The taste of hard flesh was not a sensation Ba'el's body took lightly.

I tried to pull back. Ba'el's own body was slow to react, but there was hardly anywhere to go in the first place. Even if there was anywhere to go, she used my own hands to grab hold of the goat skulls attached to each side of my head. They acted like a pair of handle bars, and the death grip of her daemon strength stopped me from budging an inch. Every time I tried to pull back, she pulled me back in. I could feel Ba'el's lung struggle for air, and I could hardly breath through my nose at all.

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it? Now... You know this thing better than I do, so if you want this over with, get to work."

Hearing my voice giving me those taunting words of encouragement and using my tools at her disposal filled me with anger, but I dared not even try to speak or utter a noise. Instead, I tried to remain as still and lifeless as I could manage.

"Still want to play this game the hard way, do you? So be it."

In response to my unwillingness to cooperate, to fellate myself, she merely thrust my hips as violently as she could. My ability to breath was cut off entirely. My eyes shot open wide, and I almost gagged but strangely didn't. It was a reaction I expected, but Ba'el's body merely took it in from glans to base.

"There are ways... To get this done. Whether you work with me or not, Laven." Ba'el said, grimacing and short of breath.

My own body seemed to be having problems holding on itself, despite Ba'el's best efforts to try reigning control over it. That did not stop her from rocking my body's hips back and forth, while dragging

her head, with me stuck in it, back and forth with reckless abandon. I could hardly breath. My vision was going black every so often. It wasn't that I just had no control of the body I was stuck in, but my own body which was now assaulting me had pinned me down completely. It was a surreal experience. I felt like I was floating around in someone else's head. I could only look through the windows that were her eyes as all other senses converged. That alone was an assault all on its own.

Tears were welling up in my eyes. I could feel them. Snot was running down my nose... Ba'el's nose... A trail of drool escaped the corner of her mouth, and something hot, wild and hard wriggled and thrust about inside. I could feel it batter up against my own mind. It was that close after all. All five of Ba'el's own senses crashed up against me like waves. The touch of her own body, my body pressing up against hers, the world from her eyes when I dared open them, the smell of my own member and nothing else. The sound of wet flesh smacking together which rung inside my head... A feeling of warmth surging up from below... That was the most frightening one of all.

The taste suddenly changed, and my eyes shot open on their own. While I was busying myself floating about on the brink of sanity, my own body had heat up noticeably. A throbbing in the back of my throat and on top of my tongue was picking up. It didn't take me long to figure out where this was going.

“Here we go!” I heard my voice shout out.

Hearing it didn't make me feel any better for my powers of deduction. I had tried to remain as detached as possible, but I was snapped back to reality when I realized at last where that reality was heading. I struggled to get Ba'el's numb arms against my body's own stomach and tried to separate us, but I simply could not muster enough strength out of the little demon's body. She hadn't been lying when she said these thin arms of hers were powerless on their own. I had no strength to lend them.

There wasn't a thing I could do when I felt the throbbing become a pulse from the base through the shaft to the tip. I felt something thick burst out. It hit the back of the throat; it was bitter and thick. I felt as though I would gag again, but Ba'el's body refused to react in such a way. From the throat, down to the stomach, each wriggling pulse I could feel kept pouring my own seed down. It was hot, but not nearly as hot as a fire that seemed to kindle and flare up deep down inside her own center.

My ears were filled with my own voice, which Ba'el let shamelessly howl out with groans of ecstasy with each shot she fired from my own body. She persisted for a whole thirty seconds, maybe more, maybe less, before finally calming down. It was only then that the grip on my head was gone, and the living thing pulled free. I

coughed once, twice. I tried to spit, get rid of the taste from my mouth, but a hand quickly held my jaw shut and lips tight.

"Whoa there. You can't go wasting any of that. I'll need every bit of that," Ba'el said, using my hand to clamp her own mouth.

I had only just then gotten the ability to breathe again, but now I couldn't still. For as much as went down Ba'el's throat, I could still feel the bitter cocktail of her spit with my semen and other juices. The disgusting sensation was driving me mad. It made me sick to my stomach, but that sickness and disgust was only superficial. It was all in my head. There was something rising up out of her own body. Her white skin was flushing red; her body was noticeably more sensitive. It scared the hell out of me. I didn't feel it before. I noticed it, but I could feel the warmth now. Not just what her body felt within her own mouth, but everywhere else. It was a mixed signal clashing with my own thoughts.

I couldn't do a thing since I could still hardly move Ba'el's body. With her mouth covered, I could only breathe through the nose, but that only made the smell more pungent. I kept being stubborn, so another hand came in to pinch her little nose shut. Unable to breath at all, I had to quaff down the contents swilling inside my mouth with a gag. In a struggle to breathe, it had done it on its own accord, but it was rewarded with both hands being removed so that I could breathe again. I coughed, gagged and heaved. Yet, my body also felt far less sluggish than before...

"There we go," She said encouragingly with my voice.

"...Stop it," I pleaded weakly between coughing fits.

"Not a chance in hell," She replied immediately. "We still have the main event."

Not in recent memory have I heard two more ominous words put together. I didn't have the time to muster even two words of my own together before my own hands under the demon's control snuck down and grabbed hold of Ba'el down below. A sharp gasp escaped from my own lips and Ba'el's legs shook. It felt as though something was rubbing inside me. A heat, an electrical spark from down under that traveled up the girl's spine and assaulted me directly. It numbed my senses, and I could feel my mind blow back from its seat of control. The girl was small. My own body was larger. My own fingers were much too large. I couldn't bring myself to look, I didn't have to, I knew what was going on and I tried my best to stifle the voice her body was trying to let out.

The sensation stopped. I opened my eyes to see Ba'el's green eyes looking right at me. Between the two of us she was rubbing an index and thumb together. Between them was a clear mucous like liquid. It formed strands that held their shape for quite some distance

before breaking. The fingers were close enough to my nose, that I could smell it too. My mind had been reeling before, but it snapped back into gear; my eyes refocused.

"Yeah, that's a scent you're more familiar with. That got your attention, didn't it?" She said, my voice still gruff and heavy. "You put on a tough face. You're real stubborn, but look how wet you got blowing off your own dick. How messed up is that?"

Laughter. My own voice laughed, but it laughed with all the same notes as the demon and not my own... But I wasn't out yet. I laughed too. It sounded like the demon girl's, but the notes were all my own. Ba'el's green eyes turned back on me, intrigued, slightly irritated. She couldn't hide it.

"You are still you, right?" I said. "I'm also still me. You can stick me in here, but it's still your body. They are separate things."

Her eyes widened, her voice complimentary, "So you do listen after all... That's a start. We still have to deal with that selective listening of yours though, so don't get ahead of yourself."

The fingers thrust back between the legs and teased the entrance. When I felt a finger sink inside, the vexing feeling of violation and phantom feeling ran roughshod over me. With her other free hand of mine, she pinched one of the blood gorged nipples, the thin layer of fatty tissue below it, and tweaked it, pulled it, teased it. I couldn't stop Ba'el's body from squirming. It took everything I had just to keep her voice from coming out.

"You act tough, but you've probably also noticed something else," She said forbiddingly. "How long can you keep yourself separated from me?"

Those words struck me in the heart like a dagger then twisted.

"Maybe you noticed? You might be yourself in there, but you still feel everything I would feel. The body is the same, even the brain is the same. The only thing different is you in there and me in you... How long can you remember that? It's the ultimate mind over matter problem. Are you slipping up already? What happens when the pain... or pleasure... is too much? What do you think happens to you then? You'll start having problems keeping track of who's who."

I opened my eyes and glared at myself. My own eyes were staring back at me, and I was looking back at myself through someone else's eyes.

"I do look good with a nice shade of blue for my eyes," She said with a sinister smile. "And that angry little pout on my face you're making is adorable!"

She moved fast. Too fast. I couldn't help but yelp in surprise when I was pushed down on my back. Ba'el, holding me down with my own body, loomed over my- herself.

“A fair bit of oral is nice, now and then, but I can't get all my vitamins like that. That was just an appetizer. What I need is the entree!”

Now I was in real danger. I thrashed and tried to fight back. The arms and legs of Ba'el's body seemed more responsive; they had more strength to them, but I couldn't fend off the daemon's spirit inside my own body. It was an entity which hammer tossed a giant with ease. As I tried to kick and punch, Ba'el used my hands to pin my arms down to the bed. When I tried to kick, she pushed forward until her hooves were over my shoulders. I couldn't lift them any higher. The knees were almost against her ears, and I couldn't move them back down either.

I looked down, and I could see Ba'el's own raised hips, the bare flesh and lips of her nether regions red and wet. Waiting in earnest above it was my own cock and balls, already recovered and prepared for a second round. Unable to move, I could only shimmy the demon's body side to side. Her horns clacked against the wall behind me when I tried to scoot away. It hurt when they bent. They were not built to bend. I looked around in desperation for an escape route, but there was nothing. Ba'el used my hips to grind against her privates. The veiny shaft of my own penis slid and hot dogged between the folds at her entrance, teasing it.

Even more than the fingers, the heat from it shook the girl's senses to her core. There was something instinctual to the monster. It knew what was coming. It was overjoyed. A sense of purpose and accomplishment rose out from that dormant subconscious and rattled my own consciousness with it, a primal feeling, a monstrous feeling. It was... enlightening... but it was a dangerous feeling that I tried desperately to keep at bay.

Without a word, Ba'el thrust in suddenly. It was rough, right to the base, as far as she could go. A warmth, an electric shock, a shiver of pain surged through the demon's body. I felt it start at where we were both connected, and while I tried to prepare myself when it reached me, it seized me by the throat. Her own senses throttled me and left myself as breathless as she was.

The pain was very real. My eyes—which had only just dried themselves—moistened, and the waterworks flowed. It was a pinching sensation that refused to go away, even as the rest of her body began to heat up, even hotter than it was before. It seemed as though I wasn't the only one though. I watched as Ba'el struggled to keep a straight face as she pushed forward. With my teeth grit and controlled breathing, she labored to maintain control.

“Unholy mother of hell. That's... Tight...” She groaned.

The pain on my face as Ba'el tried to keep a lid on that load

was nothing to the grimace I tried to bear with. I began to wonder why anyone would-

A thin trickle of red from her raised lower half came down over her stomach.

"Whoops, did I forget about that?" Ba'el said callously. "I've been pent up for so long, been asleep for so long I completely forgot about that. I had always wondered how that felt. Oh well. There's no use in crying over spilt milk... How does it feel though? Not every day a man gets his comeuppance by having to be subjected to that.... Funny, your fit of arrogance saved me from that bit of karma myself. How thoughtful of you."

I thought the pain was gone at last, but then she pushed forward and brought my own body's weight down on top of me. Ba'el's back curved even more, my dick plunged even deeper into the painfully throbbing crevice and the bite of pain flared up once again. The painful grimaces on my face didn't seem to concern the demon at all. The gritting of those teeth soon gave way, and the grin returned. Her green glistening eyes glared down at me, taking in a sadistic pleasure in watching her own body writhe in pain.

Or so it was pain, at first.

The position we were in gave Ba'el free run of entering as deep as she could manage. It did not take her long to take that to the next level. It wasn't experimenting on where she needed to go; she already knew that. It was her body that she was assaulting after all.

"That's right. Don't worry about a thing at all, Laven. I know exactly what I'm doing. Innocent and sweet hearts like your own, I've been there to see them drop to depravity. All just for a tiny taste of power. More girls and women into witches throughout the ages, just like this."

She even had gathered herself together to talk down to me. I was ashamed to admit that I could not. I grit my teeth, closed my eyes and tried to force my beating heart to remain still. It was a game of mind over matter. It was obvious, but the more obvious that became, the more aware of the struggle I became. The more she taunted me, the more frustrated I became. The more frustrated I became, the less control I had. When I lost control, the feelings of Ba'el's body washed over me.

I felt disgust, shame, embarrassment, but I was ultimately afraid. I was afraid of the warm feeling that came from Ba'el's loins. I could not ignore it. If I kept my thoughts silent, I might sink into her own thoughts. Those primal monstrous thoughts. The brain and body of hers that writhed and tried to moan in pleasure. I had only the power to bite her tongue and stop that from happening. With my own eyes, I stared back at the demon's in defiance. Watching the smug grin on

that face of mine as she changed pace, shifted around, probing, sliding, grazing against different crevices and folds inside her own body. Each new assault reset my efforts back to zero. The goal post I needed reach in order to claim any kind of victory, no matter how small, kept being moved further and further away. I could feel a heat, a pulsing and numbness which was.... slowing... my own thoughts.

With a firm grip, Ba'el grabbed hold of my hips and lifted me off the bed entirely. Her hips! Ba'el lifted her own hips with my body in-between-

Something twitched inside. Some position she took, it touched on something sensitive.

"Ah!"

A moan escaped through my lips. Ba'el's lips. I watched the demon in my body twist my own pearly white teeth in a cruel victorious smile.

"At last! Honesty!" She cheered.

I had grit my teeth in defiance so hard, for so long, that one slip was all it took for my entire body slacken. My brow knit together tightly, but I couldn't scramble fast enough to get my center back. Even I could not ignore the hum of moans in the back of my throat. I tried to swallow them down, but she had touched on something. A trump card she had been holding onto. The demon had been toying, and now that she had gotten what she wanted, she got bored with that game and picked up the pace of her thrusting with my hips.

I was slipping. My eyes were losing focus, and my neck felt soft and weak. My whole body which was stiff as a board went soft. A crack in the dam, one leak, and it spread to allow another crack. I couldn't hold it all back anymore. Another low moan hummed in my throat. It was erotic. If I had heard it coming from anywhere else other than what felt like my own throat, it would have excited me. Instead, it frightened me. I was losing my faculties.

The demon wasn't about to lose her advantage. Her own face, my face, wasn't unaffected either. I could feel as Ba'el's own body, moving on its own accord down below, pulled, kneaded and crushed my own penis within it. There's no way even she could use her own spirit to keep that unruly body of mine calm in a situation like this. But that's what she wanted. Victory for here was domination. If she felt good, then it was just a bonus. If I allowed myself to admit that this... felt... good... then I had lost. I was afraid of what I would lose if I did.

That moment of truth was... fast approaching. I couldn't hold on much longer.

"Hyaaa~" Ba'el's voice escaped from under the lid I had put it.

One loud moan, a panting I could no longer keep shut. Ba'el's

body was too hot. It was overheating. If I didn't... If I didn't cool it down, my brain was going to melt. But my brain felt like it was... melting... anyways...

My vision had been going black before, but now it was going white. I no longer had control of this body's breathing. I no longer could keep it quiet. But the demon in my body didn't have the composure to mock me. She was too busy holding on herself. The thrusting had become like that of a jackhammer. The only thing touching the bed was the back of my head. Her hooves were still resting on my shoulders. To try staying grounded, to fight the feeling of floating away, they had wrapped around the back of Laven's head. All the demon had to do was push down, then pull the hips back. It was a straight down effort to the deepest parts of this demon's privates.

The last thing... I remember now... Is that something was clenching down tight... down there. I could feel the folds clinging so tight, that I feared my own member, pumping in and out of this body, would burst like a blood sausage. The crushing force felt much stronger than the resistant force. A million nerves could feel every contour of my own dick. It was a feeling that made me feel ill, but there was also a nauseous feeling welling up inside the demon I was stuck in. Dizzy, warm, vision whiting out.

Was Ba'el's body... Climaxing? I couldn't tell. It was dizzy, almost sickeningly so. I wasn't sure where my own disgust began and where her heat and pleasure began. When I felt that wriggling live piece of my self pulsing inside like it had in my mouth before, I knew the danger was real.

"No. No, don't!" I cried out.

Ba'el had no quip or taunt to throw my way. Those green eyes of hers were wholly invested in continuing to pound away.

Inside, deep inside, I was privy to hearing a bestial voice. An instinct. It was a primal desire which called out for my body. It wanted the seed it had. Its life force. It wanted it badly. It wasn't just a hunger or a desire; it was a need. Like something it needed to make itself feel whole. If Ba'el obliged- the voice was getting louder. It was rattling at the cage. I still was sitting on top of it, trying to keep it contained. If it got what it wanted... I don't think I could hold on-

I could hear my own voice, my body's own voice, groan and moan. I was so dazed and lost. The body I was in was panting. At some point, it had begun shivering and shaking on its own. If it were not lifted helplessly off the floor, held so tightly, I don't know what it would do on its own. I was just an observer, but I felt my own mind—which felt like my own body—being overrun with the feelings and sensations of Ba'el. Those thoughts which were naturally borne from it were assaulting me.

One last thrust, that's all that was needed. I could feel it start from the base, which the outer folds clung greedily to as it moved up along the shaft. The pulsing waves of Ba'el's own body followed behind it, pulling it along. Pulling it deeper inside herself. A splash of something molten hot. The heat of both our bodies was more than I could stand, so I had a hard time imagining I could feel something so scalding, but there it was. I knew what it was right away. It was the last thing her body was waiting for. The cage I was sitting on rattled back and forth until I was thrown off it. I heard my own body moan and roar, I heard Ba'el's voice, coming through what felt like my own throat and mouth cry out in ecstasy.

“No~!” I tried to scream.

It came out slurred.

Thrust after thrust. Almost all the way out, then all the way back in. Pulse after pulse. Glob after glob of my own scathingly hot sticky semen painted the insides of Ba'el white. I lost control completely; the body moved on its own as it writhed. I thought the back would snap and me along with it. Almost half a minute of this feeling, and it already felt as though it would be never ending. My body was let go. Let go to slump back onto the bed. Ba'el slumped down but hovered over. Her green eyes refocused and stared into my own. When she looked at me, she could not hold back her wicked, sick and twisted smile. I wasn't even sure what kind of face I was making.

“No... No.... More~” I slurred.

“Ha ha ha.” Ba'el laughed triumphantly.

I turned over, something hot running between my legs. I felt my eyes slowly droop and close; the demon continued to laugh with my voice.

“Ha ha- hwa hwa hwa~”

I shook my head. Something wasn't- I looked down. Laying before me was the body of Ba'el. Laying on its side laughing. Her laugh wasn't normal though. It sounded just like her, just slurred... I myself felt hot, sweaty. I rubbed my hand against my forehead. My own hand. My heart skipped a beat. I felt out of breath, but...

“Ah!” Ba'el shook back to her senses.

I was still woozy, Ba'el rolled onto her stomach and seemed pretty out of it herself. She held up her paw in front of her eyes. She studied it, then looked over her shoulder back up at me. I saw her green eyes, goat pupils and all. We glared at one another with dumbfounded expressions on our faces.

“Huh? Well... I don't remember ending... How?”

I was back in my old body. Ba'el was back in her own. My body and brain once again felt like they were on the same wavelength. My fingers, all five of them, moved as I wanted them to. It was Ba'el now

who looked confused.

“I didn't release the spell to.... hmm,” She mused.

With my body, brain and mind all together again, I felt a certain clarity. Like I had exited the storm... Or merely drifted into the eye of it. My thoughts quickly turned to the grinning face of the demon. The sinister look on her before... The one she made with my own during... I felt... Angry. Furious. I grit my teeth, and my breathing became heavier, faster.

“Whatever. This should do for now. I- Hey, what's your problem,” I heard Ba'el say, her voice sounding distant below me.

Our eyes met. She seemed taken aback for a moment but glared back at me.

“Hey! Get off of me already. Unless you want me to-”

It took just that kind of tone in her voice to set me off. I leaned down and grabbed hold of her arm.

“Don't get ahead of yourself, Laven. You're-” As she spoke, she grabbed hold of my arm with her free arm and tried to pull it off.

And failed.

“-What?”

She put effort into it this time. She groaned, strained, but was unable to budge me at all. She should have the strength to clamp down on my arm and turn the bones to dust and muscles to mush with just a simple squeeze if she wanted to, but there wasn't any strength in her grip at all. The worst she could manage was an Indian burn. Her eyes told me all I needed to know. Our spirits were back where they belonged, but it didn't happen because she wanted it to. On top of that, her strength hasn't returned yet.

Before she could make another move, I took my other hand and grabbed hold of her neck from behind and pushed her down.

“Whoa! Stop right there! What do you think you're-”

She was on her stomach with her butt hanging in the air. The stain of white still seeping out from her privates was the painted target I needed. I didn't even give her another chance to speak up. I shifted into position, dropped down on top of her and thrust my way in, violently.

“Heeee!~” A yelp of surprise, pain and a touch of pleasure escaped from her lips.

It... Was... Tight. I felt myself convulse right away. I didn't expect it at all. I came, but I was dry. I had yet to recover, but I couldn't stop. It didn't stop.

“hu-what are yuu?~ Ah~!” Ba'el's own speech was still slurred. The way her words stumbled over each other and the look on her face told me she wasn't expecting that. “Nwo, downt I'm shill~”

After I was done convulsing, while I was still tender myself, I

pulled back my hips and then pushed myself in as far as I could go. Ba'el's back curved like a bow. I let go of her arm and neck and instead grabbed hold of her horns. I ended up trading one beast for another. But this beast... This was the devil I did know.

With her horns firmly in my grasp and her back bent, I continued to pound away. It was tight. It was hot. I had felt hotter; I had been more sensitive, but never before had I felt something crush down on my dick so hard. It was easy to go in. It greedily welcomed me in, but pulling back out took effort. But I was too furious to stop. All the anger, all the humiliation had built up too much. Ba'el was too defenseless. I couldn't stop myself.

She wanted to make a fool out of me? Mess with my head? I'LL SHOW HER!

"Lawen! Swtop~"

Every time I pushed in, I felt the crushing walls inside her. I could feel the warm crevices as they traced over every square inch of my cock. It squeezed tight and made every nerve ending there scream out. Scream out in pain. Scream out in pleasure. Pleasure was louder. My anger was louder still.

I grew tired of leaning over, so I pulled her back upright by the horns. I let go of her horns. I pulled back myself but grabbed hold of her tiny legs from behind.

"Laven!" She managed to say clearly at last, "H-hey... You wouldn't... with a poor little girl, would you?"

"No," I said.

Her pleading face looked back with a little wry smile of relief. I leaned back over, right next to her ear.

"But you ain't a child, are you?" I whispered.

With my hands wrapped securely under her thighs, I stood up. She was light. Really light. The demon didn't have the strength to resist. Sure, she kicked her legs and little hooves in protest, but Ba'el barely had the strength left to claw or swing her arms around. With her lower half cradled in my arms, I dropped her down. I had recovered already, so I was hard, hot, ready and waiting. I plugged into the hole where my previous efforts, under Ba'el's control, had left its stain. From this position, she was impaled all the way. Her stomach bulged a bit as her body was too small to take it all in normally.

A moan and cry of ecstasy from her mouth was music to my ears. It sounded like justice. For someone who spoke of karma and teaching others lessons, this was the right kind of revenge and one she would understand. Maybe she would appreciate it, laugh about it later. Right now though, she couldn't really focus. Her tail whipped back and forth; it tickled my abdomen. I had to be careful about her backward swept horns, but I managed. Her clawed paws might have

been a problem, but she kept them to herself. She caressed the bulge on her stomach, and I felt the bit of extra pressure on my dick. She held onto her cheeks as she tried to hold her slackened jaw up while her tongue hung out of her mouth. As she lost herself, she reached down with one paw and spread her lower lips and stimulated herself so rough and fast that I thought she might hurt herself more than I could ever harm her.

She had left me on the verge of falling before, now she was going to take my place just before the edge.

"Wuhat is wif dis?-" She moaned and slurred.

She appeared confounded by how sensitive her own body was. I hadn't been completely in sync before, and I nearly lost my mind in there. Now that I was back, the difference was huge just in my own body. If the same was happening to her, then what she was feeling could be far more than what I had to endure. As strong, wise, and experienced as she claimed to be, perhaps it could not have prepared her for how sensitive this new body of her really is. Could the same be said of all monsters?

"Lawen! Swtop. Pwease. I cwant!"

Her tongue was hanging out of her mouth. It was unsightly, but she wasn't a girl for grace in the first place, so I found it oddly fitting. That might just be the anger talking though; I was pretty low on sympathy. My body felt like it was on auto-pilot. I had lost count of how many dry runs I had done, but her body was reacting to it each time. So the flashes of white were no doubting hitting her again and again.

Still, she was getting louder, too loud. I leaned down, being careful to avoid her horn lest I lose an eye after getting this far. Her face turned toward me, eyes unfocused. My face was too close for her. Those eyes which had been unfocused before, snapped back to normal. The gleam of life returned to them.

"Laven! Stop!"

Had I been saner, I would have listened. Her protests were sincere; that's what I honestly thought. I had gotten this far without being stopped though... Maybe because this is what she wanted all along. As our faces got closer, she struggled and tried to get away. She tried but didn't have the strength. I chased her face which tried desperately to turn away. I bit down on her lips when I caught them. When she had nowhere to run, I violated her further with my tongue. Tears streamed down her face, I didn't see them—my eyes were closed—but I felt them on my own cheeks as they flowed down. She tensed up, and her flailing stopped. Through my eyelids, I felt a warm glow. A brilliant light. It wasn't white; it was blue. It was bright enough, close enough, that I couldn't open my eyes. The sun could have been right before my face for all I knew.

Ba'el tense body went limp, and the flash of blue light vanished. There was a burning in my hips from the core of my glutes like my ass was on fire; I kept pounding away. I opened my eyes and saw her teary, empty green husks. Had I been not so furious, so bestial and filled with anger and lust, it would have pulled my heartstrings. Instead, I picked up the pace. I could tell I wasn't working on blanks anymore. There was a painful stirring in my loins; my testes were working overtime, and I was ready to go again for real. Although the demon seemed out of it, she must have still felt it as well. I started lifting her up and dropping her back down faster, rocking my hips in the rhythm as well. There was a big risk that I might have my legs give out and collapse both of us into a heap on the floor. But the pain of firing off a third time, the mere build up to it, spurred me onward to get it out. I'd really go crazy if I couldn't.

The slap of skin and the moans from the limp demon still writhing in ecstasy filled the small room. I kept pushing myself onward, harder and harder, until I growled like a beast myself. I felt like I was balling up a part of myself and forcing it through my penis and into the girl. It wasn't just a pulse. This wasn't just cumming. I went off like a gunshot then a fire hose. A quick and steady torrent that shot into Ba'el's nethers. She couldn't possibly hold it all, so all that fresh semen pushed out from where we were connected. There was nowhere else for it to go. Her back arched, and a loud, shrieking moan escaped her lips.

I couldn't hold myself up any longer. My arms were numb; they were sapped of strength, so I slowly let Ba'el down. She stumbled forward and broke her fall with her arms against the wall. Her legs were shaky, barely holding on, but she somehow managed to keep standing, even when I fell on top of her. Her strength must have come back to her at some point, but she was too out of it to notice... Too shocked or defeated to care.

Yet I still wasn't done. Using her as a crutch. With my arms anchoring to hers while I stood tall over her, I pushed up against her bare backside. I lifted her up off the ground slightly, on the tips of her hooves, and slid myself back in. And out again. She moaned again, but she didn't stop me.

“Nwo. Lawen. Twhat enuf. Pwase. Forgibe me-”

I was slower, more methodical, but I kept pushing up on her. She continued panting and moaning; white liquid mixed with her own streamed down her thighs.

The sound of skin against skin and sex echoed in the room. I eventually lost track of time. I don't know when I stopped. A time must have come when I passed out. Perhaps I kept going after that, or even when the two of us collapsed. All I know is that I kept going. For how

long? I don't know.

Chapter 78

I had awoken some time ago, but I had lost track of how many minutes and hours that was. This closed and claustrophobic space deep beneath the earth seemed to make time irrelevant. I hadn't even moved since I woke up. The cold stone wall at my back acted like a cold shower, but I couldn't shake myself out of a stupor. My body was sore, yet my muscles had long since stopped crying in pain and had just decided to give up entirely. There was no use in trying to fight my own fatigue, so I remained seated against the wall, knees to my chest while covered in a ragged old blanket and these shabby old clothes for warmth. With steely eyes, I watched over the quiet room, the one other I shared it with did the same.

Ba'el sat upon a stool at the opposite end of the room. Her hooves didn't even reach the floor as she kicked them lazily. She was clothed now, if you could call what she usually wore clothes. You wouldn't catch me not being thankful for that. I stole a glance at her every once in a while, but she never looked back. At least not that I knew of. The girl's shoulders were slumped and the rest of her body appeared to be grasping at what little energy it had left to stay upright. She looks exactly how I feel right now. Her eyes must look how mine do right now: heavy, unfocused and listless. I caught myself thinking that many times over the last few hours. There was no burning in them, only the smouldering ruins of the passion and madness that lit both of us up before we passed out.

A pungent smell of smoke helped keep those thoughts alive. Before I had woken up, she seemed to have found an old wooden pipe somewhere in the old foreman's belongings. Red charcoal glowed from where the dried leaves inside smouldered, a puff of smoke escaping outside the side of her mouth every so often. With her paw holding up her chin, she slid the curved wooden pipe along her teeth from one end of her mouth to the other as she grit them together, gnawing slightly on the wood.

The mischievous expression that had been perpetually on her face was nowhere to be seen now. A sober face had replaced it while we sat here. Images of tornado and hurricane survivors squatting on the ruins of what was once their homes came to mind. It wasn't anything physical we had lost. She kicked her legs out in a steady methodical rhythm, as though she were sulking methodically while lost deep in her thoughts. I don't recall having grabbed a blanket before passing out a while ago, so she must have done that for me. That was enough to convince myself that she wasn't out for vengeance... or blood. Still, there was something eerie and unsettling about her mood.

I suppose I wasn't much better off. I too was dealing with some

heavy shit. A feeling was running rampant inside my head. It was identical to that fleeting memory of a dream almost remembered. I knew what happened hours earlier, but the memories of it were like mist. All I had left of it was my sore exhausted body and a calm Ba'el. I could explain why the demon was calm if I used what I did remember as an excuse, but the vivid memories were already fading away. Just like a dream which you can't recall when the morning came. If the images and feelings left in me are correct, maybe I just wanted to forget. Beyond the incredible anger and my vicious assault on her, my recollection of what happened before is hard to believe. I couldn't remember why I was mad; the cause was something too fantastical for my brain to process. There was just no wrapping my head around it. The harder I tried to remember; the more quickly the event slipped from my grasp.

My head felt as though it were caught in a vice. On one side was the oppressive fallout of guilt from feeling more mad than I ever been; the other grip was trying to push me away from that feeling, that my anger was more than justified, but it only pushed me into the other grip and caught me in the pincer. I still could not actually believe what had happened. Ba'el had somehow... shoved me into her body while hijacking my own. I believe it was to... teach me a lesson. It didn't work out as she planned. Her spell broke early. Thankfully it did. I could no longer feel those sensations. All those id and superego thoughts vanished the moment I left. I no longer had a connection to those visceral memories, and I could not recall them. It was as if they were all locked inside her head and not in mine... I could feel it deep down in my... well... soul.

For now, I'd go with that. There wasn't much else to go on to explain what happened.

The silence was broken with a sudden jolt from Ba'el. The legs of her stool scraped into the floor as she shook suddenly. It was a sound like an explosion in the deathly quiet room. She turned her head up toward the ceiling, squinted her eyes, then looked back down while closing them slowly.

With a deep breath, she spoke for the first time in hours, “Looks like it's time.”

The demon's voice was hollow. There was no expectation in it, just solemn resignation to the inevitability that we would once again have to throw ourselves into the waiting maw of danger. For just a little while longer I tried to pretend I didn't know the crazy thing we must do.

“Time for what?” I asked.

Ba'el leaped off the stool, flicked the pipe till its fire died and put it away without so much as glancing at me.

“That wrinkly old windbag just tried to summon me. Again.”

Where did she even put that- No, now is not the time! I threw the blanket off and stood up. She waved her hand dismissively at me, so that I might calm down when she paid something so serious no mind.

“Already told that witch it wouldn't work. Not even by force. She's thick-headed enough to try in vain. Girl's got her head too far up her own ass.”

Trotting back toward the tool cabinet she had plopped down in front of the door to stop me from escaping, Ba'el walked beside and with one leg kicked it over. With a terrible crash, the wooden frame splintered, and the tools inside spilled out like entrails. She seemed even less concerned about noise and stealth than she has ever been.

“Come on, Laven. We got work to do. She'll give up and do her swan song eventually. You won't have any orphans left to save when she burns em up to pull that off.”

Nothing more needed to be said. We'd climb this mountain from the inside and then go clash with the Crone and her small army of witches. If we didn't stop her she would poison the watershed for kilometers around. Those waters filled with youth would transform the landscape, perhaps irreversibly. Without Ba'el, it wouldn't wash over the entire Marches, but it would do more than enough damage and impact far too many lives. The age of women would regress, they would become witches, men would be driven mad with lust and the Crone would increase her congregation several fold. We needed to stop that from happening at all costs.

The Church would hear of it quick, very quickly, and ride into the Marches en masse. A war would start against the Crone. Many would die. Many more would be displaced... That war might even spread. The whole Empire seems like a tinderbox ready to explode. My own journey may become impossible if soldiers and Church knights stalk the roads, the fields and the woods to stamp out all monster insurrection. My allegiances are already written in stone... Nor would I reconsider. Not after everything I've experienced.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that perhaps we were not prepared. I would have to make sure. As Ba'el was pulling the door off its frame and tossing it aside, I just had to ask.

“Are you sure about this? If the Crone gets her hands on you, then her spell is going to affect the entire Marches.”

“What is there to be sure of?” She responded flatly as she threw the door away.

I was about to elaborate, but Ba'el just kept on walking into the inky darkness. Light seemed to be an optional thing for the demon. She appeared ready to leave me behind if I didn't hustle myself. She was still refusing to even look at me, let alone slow down. I ran to

scoop up the oil lantern to light my way through the pitch black caves and rushed to catch up with her.

"You had to run last time, didn't you? You said you were low on magic."

"What did you think we were doing earlier, Laven? Playing patty-cakes?" Her voice echoed back to me from further down the dark corridor.

I finally caught up to her at one of the old three-way intersections of the cave's lower catacombs. One way lead to who knows where while the others lead back toward the aquifers and strange rooms with stranger rusted mechanical contraptions. Ba'el had come to a halt at it, meditating on which way to go. Instead of picking either direction, she faced the wall between the two other junctions.

With one index claw raised, she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Dancing just above the tip of her claw was a tiny white light. It looked like the magical flares she used earlier to light up the cave. From such a tiny light, it actually outshone the flickering light of my own lantern... At first.

The pale white light of the marble sized orb on her finger sparked. A few tendrils of lightning sizzled the air surrounding it. It grew in size to that of a golf ball, then turned a deep shade green. A pentagram of green light with strange runes circling around its outside spun below her hooves. As the orb of green light above her claw pulsed and the lightning flickered more viciously as the seconds passed, she slowly lowered her arm and pointed her finger toward the stone wall.

A faint fizzle and buzz on her fingertip turned into a loud electrical whine. The green orb, now spinning rapidly on the tip of her claw, turned red. The pentagram spinning below her did so as well and sped up so much that it's shape became indistinguishable from a deep crimson circle. From her extended finger, a half-dozen smaller pentagrams formed in a straight line like the barrel of a gun. The crackle of lightning escalated, the golf ball became the size of an apple. A flash blinded me. An uproarious screech of raw power split the air; a focused laser beam of red energy shot out. The destruction it wrought was no different from a cast-iron ball fired from a cannon. It collided with the stone wall and refused to stop there so chunks of rubble exploded in all directions.

I covered my face as the debris and shrapnel rained down on me; the sound of rock melting mixed with the buzzing of power. After about five seconds, the noise came to an end. I still needed to cover my face with rags so I didn't choke on the dust cloud that still filled the tunnel. When the smoke had finally cleared, I saw Ba'el standing in front of a wall which had been blown apart and disintegrated. A two

meter hole in the wall, six meters deep. The walls of the new hole were still glowing red hot, maybe still hot enough to light someone on fire with just a touch. On the other side was a whole other room, a whole other set of passages and routes to take. She calmly brought her smoking finger to her lips and blew it out.

"Yeah. You could say I'm ready," she said with confidence.

It was a terrible display of power, but there was something that frightened me more.

"They're going to sense that," I said.

"Good," was all she said in reply.

Without waiting a second longer, the demon passed through the fresh hole in the wall which was just then starting to cool, the color of the walls returning to their natural grey. She left me behind, no doubt with a stupid look on my face. I had a hard time keeping my lower jaw from dropping after watching that destructive display of power. There was more to the magical energies contained in that small body of hers beyond punching things very hard. That was power was what the Crone was after. It was also why she was so confident in standing up to the Crone and her army. Her only target was the Crone after all. She didn't need to stop all those other witches. They'd scatter to the four winds in the aftermath.

Hold on. Where did she get the idea for the shortcut in the first place?

"Wait, hold on a second. How did you know-?"

"I didn't. I just wanted you to shut up. Let's go!" She barked back while once again disappearing into the dark cave.

I had other questions. Chiefly, how patty-cakes gave someone the energy, magical powers, to melt through solid stone at will. It was highly doubtful that she was in a lecturing mood, so I could only continue to follow her.

She had bored straight through the wall and the labyrinthine structure with ease. These catacombs then revealed themselves to be far more complicated than I first suspected. Strange rusted mechanisms which worked in ways that were beyond me. I suspected they might be pistons, rotors and axles for creating mechanical energy, perhaps some sort of power station that fed off the water stored and flowing underground, but there were no such things on these machines. Whatever these machines did, and however they moved, was not like any kind of machine I was used to seeing. They must run off a different power source. I had just seen energy created from nothing in the palm of Ba'el's hand, but I was still resisting saying magic was the answer.

Through the complex new set of tunnels we delved, Ba'el summoned more of those firefly-like lights, but this time sent them out

as harmless sprites. They flicked, floated and flew down the many winding paths of the labyrinth. They returned, minutes later and bounced up and down, to and fro. The demon seemed to always know where to go. Not once did we run into a dead end. Our gradual path upwards, sometimes aided by old abandoned and crumbling stairwells, was efficient. But no matter how many minutes that turned into hours seemed to pass during our hike, she kept forging ahead without looking back.

I had grown accustomed to expect some witty or cruel banter from her, but she was uncharacteristically quiet. Had she been sulking this whole time? Was she upset over something that happened? I couldn't shake the feeling I had done something, but I couldn't at the same time tie guilt to it. What had happened during and after she started coming onto me was exactly like trying to remember what I had done after drinking heavily and recounting the events while in a merciless hangover. She kept this up for the better part for what must have been two hours until she finally snapped.

Her long strides forward came to a sudden stop. Her claws grabbed hold of the sides of her head, and she roughly ruffled those paws of hers through her hair.

“mmmmMMMM-ARGH! FINE!” She shouted suddenly.

Ba'el turned around, almost pulling her hair from her skull and glared at me. I could only offer her my confusion in return. The girl was red in the face, the first time I had seen it in almost an hour, so I also took a step or two backward.

“You can stop hounding me- haunting me over my shoulder. You want to know? Fine, I'll tell you!”

“About what?” I asked, curious and scared.

“Don't play dumb. I'm not stupid. I can feel it. Judging me. Trying to figure me out.”

That wasn't exactly what I was- No. Nevermind. I'll stay quiet and hear her out. If she was about to confess something for free, who was I to refuse?... I already got the gist of the price she charges otherwise.

She turned back around and continued walking forward, sending out her sprites as we continued onward and upward. This time though, I couldn't get her to stop talking.

“I already told you what I was up to in the past. Well, for the last few decades I've been floating around from one side of the Empire to the other... Stuck in a dream.”

Her voice dropped off at the end. It was even more uncharacteristic of her than the silence from before.

“I woke up almost forty years ago. Give or take a couple months now. It was a cloudy morning. Didn't know that right away

though. The first thing I saw when I woke up was darkness. Not your metaphorical darkness, mind you, I'm walking deep inside a cave here. No sunlight darkness. I remember being scared out of my mind. The only thing that told me I was still alive was how cold I felt and the sound of waves crashing. I shivered, shook, but managed to pull myself up and feel my way to the light and outside."

As we spoke, we came across a wide cavern deep inside the cave. A fitting thing to stumble upon as her story went on. She paused for a moment, looked left and right, then walked over to a large water carved pillar reaching up toward the ceiling.

"It was a cold fall morning. Fresh brine stung my eyes, and I barely had enough rags on to cover myself. My throat was dry, and my stomach was empty. Just crawling was enough to bleed me dry. If there hadn't been a small fishing ship floating by, I might have just fallen over and died there on the rocks."

Placing herself between the wall and the pillar, Ba'el pressed her back up against the wall and then kicked out with her feet toward the pillar. She used her own body as leverage; and with a little effort, the pillar cracked at its base where her hooves were, and the entire slab of rock came crashing down. I covered my ears to stop the slam from deafening me, and when I pulled my sleeve from my eyes I saw that the gap had been bridged. She pranced and bounced with each step while climbing atop the bridge.

"So I woke up in someone's shack. Warm blankets and a nice fire... I guess shack ain't very polite. It was someone's house after all."

As I climbed on top of the fallen pillar myself, I had to interrupt her, "And where exactly do they give demons a warm bed to sleep in?"

"Be quiet and I'll explain that," She snapped back. "You remember the girl you met back at the abbey with the bored expression and glasses? Well, the girl who woke up in that cave was only a little different. Just brown haired with no glasses... A few features off here and there. Point is, they were both me. Not only did I wake up with no memories; I was sealed away long before that."

"You said that was a disguise."

"It was. Before that I just happened to be sealed away in it. When life gives you an egg, you crack it open and make an omelet, not stare at it like a useless idiot... The egg that day was an old man. A grey haired fisherman and his aging wife. He took me in...

She stopped halfway across the bridge and turned around to face me once again.

"No, I didn't kill them... Bad metaphor."

Before I could agree or disagree, she turned back around and trotted to the end and leaped off onto the other side.

“Just an old couple living half a day's ride from a town on the coast. Funny how things change over just a few hundred years. You'd have to travel for days before you see so much as two stones stack on top of one another when I went to sleep...”

While I balanced upon the dubious improvised crossing, I caught Ba'el's expression for just a moment before she showed me her back once again and continued walking. There was a hint of forlorn sadness to it. Even more uncharacteristic than how she had presented herself up until now.

“Their kids had all left years ago. They moved away, beyond the town. Married, became travelers, lent their sword arm to soldiers of fortune and the guilds; it was all the same in the end. The old man took me in, treated me like one of his own kids. His wife of fifty some years didn't like it, but she didn't have the spine to tell her husband no. That would have been alright, if it weren't for the nightmares.”

She had said she was seeing the same dreams and nightmares for as long as she could remember. They all seemed fantastical and dreadful, but they were all memories, each one of them. For someone who had the confused mind of a small girl, it would be a terrifying and inexplicable thing to experience every night.

“After winter came and went, the old man and I went out onto the sea. Fished, dried it back at the house. Rode on his cart into town to sell them. His wife cooked us meals, and we all shared the same table... Lisa is what they called me. I think it was the name of a young daughter they had who didn't make it to adulthood.”

“Lisa? I guess that's where Isabelle came from,” I said.

“Yeah, that's right,” Ba'el nodded. “I was also the perfect daughter. More than any parent ever dares to hope... But nothing lasts forever. One night I woke up because of a real bad nightmare. When I did...”

She pointed to the horns on her head.

“Imagine waking up with these on you head. I thought I had some disease, that I was dying. That's when the old man walked into see why I was crying and screaming. Lucky for me, he was either too senile or had too big a heart to try running me through with a pitchfork. The old man held me instead. Told me everything was gonna be alright. I got my focus back, swallowed all those feelings, and the horns went away. That was the end of that though. Whatever innocence I had been holding onto was doomed. Try as I might, those episodes got worse and happened more often. It wasn't just bad dreams I was having. Those horns growing out of me told me I was dreaming of myself.”

Once more, she stopped walking. Ba'el turned around and looked right up at me, into my eyes.

“I figured it out eventually... More like I couldn't fool myself any longer. All the seasons and years I spent with that old man and his wife in that little shack by the sea, all the happy times, the warm nights while the cold winds blew outside... That was the dream. The horns growing out of my head was me waking up.”

“Except you-”

I tried to get a word in edgewise, but she talked over me immediately.

“Ten years. Ten years, Laven. If it were not for the horns, it would be that I didn't change at all. I watched the old man grow more frail by the year. I watched his wife's face sag, and her back bend forward further every season. Eventually, I was pulling marlins out of the sea when the old man's arms got too weak. The misses suspected something, but she never spoke up. The old man ignored it. I kept hiding it, making the horns go away whenever they appeared in the morning or the middle of the night. But I also kept getting stronger. One day, the old man fell ill. Very ill. It didn't take long for his wife to look at me with hatred and disgust. For an old fart, he was always quite lively. For him to suddenly be bedridden like that, she must have blamed me. She must have known what I was... The look in her eyes scared me, so I ran. That was my home for ten years, but in just one night I knew that I couldn't stay any longer. That dream ended.”

Ba'el turned her back on me once again. Maybe to hide the twitch on her face that she hoped I wouldn't see and what became of it.

“I never even got the chance to say good-bye. I didn't even get to thank the old man. I just ran, and I never stopped running since. The more I started to wake up, the more powerful I got, the more I did to try staying asleep. I worked on my own seal, made it stronger. Soon enough, I could even walk on holy ground. I blended in with the orphanages. I'd stay for a year or three, but I had to move on. All the other kids grew older, but I never did. It made everyone suspicious. For another thirty years I squatted at one halfway house, one orphanage or church to the next. I hid in plain sight.”

She started marching again.

“I spent the last two years at that Abbey with those girls. When I started to hear horror stories about a certain witch. I ignored it, but I had a good idea who it was and what she was up to. Then you came along. Dressed up and looking ridiculous, but everyone seemed to be buying it. It didn't take me long to figure out why you were there. It didn't matter to me at first, I knew I'd have to run away from that Abbey. Not just because everyone else had grown and aged too much around me, but that the Crone would be hitting it soon.”

“But you saw another egg happen to roll by,” I said.

The demon chuckled, “That's right. It was a sign. If I used you, I

could approach the Crone. Then I'd settle things."

"And how are you going to settle things?"

"You forget already? A long time ago, I made her what she is. I'm going to take back what I gave. If she doesn't agree, I'll beat it out of her."

"Instead of running?"

She stopped again. I could tell from her body language that she didn't take that very well, but I didn't stop.

"It's fair question, Ba'el. You asked why I should care about a bunch of orphan girls. Why a traveler like me would care about this backwater? Why don't you just keep running? Why don't you just team up again with your old friend?"

The demon slowly turned around, her eyes steely and said, "Maybe you're right."

While my heart sank, she smiled again for the first time in a long time, a wide wicked grin.

"Relax, I'm messing with you."

I nearly coughed, spat and had a heart attack. She just turned back around.

"If there was ever a time to bury an old hatchet, it's now... Laven, you can dream for as long as you want, but we all have to wake up eventually. All dreams become nightmares if you sit through em long enough... If I keep on dreaming now, pretty soon, everyone is gonna be living in a nightmare. The moment that old witch blew my seal away, something I had used to sleep on for decades... I realized my dream was over. All that time in that cozy little house... Instead of being brother, father or master, I was Lisa. I was a daughter. That old man never wanted anything in return. I had never felt that in my entire existence. Demons plot and connive. Witches have heads full of ideas about power and knowledge that they want from me... That old man... He wanted nothing; the love was unconditional. There ain't going to be any of that in these parts if the Crone has her way.

Ba'el turned around and looked right at me one more time. Her fangs were bared, her paws clenched in fists of rage and her eyes smouldered with crackling power.

"That's not going to happen because of me. Not again. Not for anyone."

"Not for Heather and the others?"

Ba'el's eyed softened, and she turned back around.

"...Too many names to remember..."

"Even the old man?"

"Especially that old man."

I think I understand now. She had lost her temper when I thought of her as a child. I was so caught up in how she looked, that I

overlooked who she actually was. She had spent the last few decades chasing a dream of peace and quiet, only to have it pulled out from under her again and again. She could pass as a child, she did just that but that was just as much a curse as a blessing. She would never change, but the world around her would. She couldn't exist as a demon in the human world, and she had fled from her duties and past life in the demon world. She couldn't take being compared to a child. It only reminded her of something that would be forever just out of her reach. A calm life surrounded by others with no worries, no responsibility. All while what she was ultimately responsible for was going to destroy the world she had been living in, in vain.

That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Ba'el?

This time the demon did not press on. While I was lost in thought, she hadn't budged a muscle. She stood still now, staring into the darkness of the cave. I did not notice anything was wrong right away. Not until what lay beyond was already on top of us.

“Oh ho~ I believe she has spotted us, dear sister,” A singsong voice chirped.

“Ha ha~ I believe you are correct, dear sister,” a melodic girl's voice responded.

Two figures emerged from the darkness ahead of us, one red and one black strolled into the light of my lamp. It was the twins that the Crone had made, the familiars. I clenched my hands into fists and readied myself, but Ba'el did not do the same.

“The mistress knew you would return.”

“She knew you were coming!”

Seems I was right. That one little display of power was like one giant radar ping. Who she sent to see us was not the most dangerous of her minions. Their odd looking claws were frightening, but their demeanor was anything but. The way they danced about and sang as they spoke told me they were diplomats and servants, not warriors or assassins. I assumed they would be leading us back to that room. It would save us the trouble and save everyone else time. It put me at ease. At the very least they wouldn't be doing anything with those girls until after we arrived.

Ba'el did not resist, so neither did I. The black one followed behind me, skipping as she followed me while the red one stayed up front ahead of Ba'el. I could see Red's spaded devil's tail flick back and forth gaily and her little vestigial wings flutter. The strange path we took in the darkness did not make sense to me; it took too many odd turns as well as go down at times, but I eventually started to see the familiar hallways Red had guided the girls and myself down the night before. After only another thirty minutes in all, the large doors to the cavern were ahead of us.

Red and Black scurried and, with much fanfare, opened the doors before us. Beyond those oaken doors were rays of red moonlight and air that buzzed with power. The intensity of the red light made the lantern I was carrying useless, so I set it down, disposed of it outside the door. Inside the gathering of witches was far bigger than I recalled from before. There wasn't just fifty some witches this time, there was row upon row of them. The balconies had increased many times and each one was occupied by a plethora of girls in their black robes and wide brimmed conical hats. The size and design of them told me they acted like a sort of insignia denoting rank.

In all, I guessed there had to be almost three hundred of them. They were wining and dining, but the spectacle of Ba'el's and my entrance brought their countless separate discussions to an end. Now each one of them was pointing and whispering among themselves. Most of their attention was levied on the demon herself. I was more of an accessory and a passing thought even though I walked only an arm's length behind her.

I wasn't sure what face she was making, but the way she was swinging her arms with a purpose told me she was confident and sure of herself. So long as the walking tank of a little girl was doing alright, I didn't have too much to worry about... Right?

A sweet, yet shrill voice called out to us, “How good of you to return on this auspicious occasion, Ba'el. I will admit I was worried, for a time, that you would not return.”

In the exact same booth as she was before, the Crone talked down to the demon while swirling a glass of red wine between her fingers. Somehow Red and Black had gone from behind us to back by her side without me noticing. Red stood there with a towel over her arm while Black held the bottle of wine. I looked behind me to confirm the two had vanished and noticed the door was now closing on its own. It had to be them and not some doubles.

the Crone spoke with delight, “Perhaps you have-”

Her eyes left Ba'el for just a moment and looked at me.

“-not reconsidered,” her voice quickly turned to disappointment.

My eyes adjusted to the red light and new brand of shadows and darkness. It was then that I spotted the girls all crowded together on the arena floor near the opposite end of the room. They sat upon what looked like a series of magical circles and runes. A shimmer of pale light surrounding them told me that there was an invisible cage keeping them there. It looked similar to the spell which invisibly shielded every witch in the Crone's coven. There were... Thirty of them now. Ten less than before... I guess that was inevitable, but it twisted my gut to see it. Thankfully, I spotted Feena, Gloria and Heather

huddled together. They saw me too, but they dared not smile when our eyes met. At least their eyes were not dead and hopeless.

Next to them were about thirty of the Crone's witches. They too sat cross legged upon an even larger assortment of magical circles. Dozens upon dozens of candles lit up the area and the entire part of the room glowed with light. They could all compose it, the ritual itself. The lines etched into the ground which led from the girls to those witches... Yes. That's it. The girls would be bled dry of their life force to fuel that ritual. What would be left behind were witches, ripe for the Crone to mold as she saw fit. All their energy, what made them human, would jump start what would cause a massive area of The Marches to undergo the same thing... All with the help of the red moon shining in from the hole in the ceiling above.

"Let the girls go," Ba'el demanded.

"That's the first thing you have to say to me?" the Crone responded, quickly standing up.

She had less patience than before. Anger rode along with the thin veneer of hospitality she gushed upon Ba'el.

"No. The first thing I actually want is for you to come down here-"

"Oh~ Ba'el."

"-So I can plant my hoof so far up your ass you'll taste dirt for the rest of your life."

The whispering among all the other witches died immediately.

"...Which won't be long," Ba'el said, smouldering with anger. "This ain't a conversation, Crone. This is a good old fashioned brow beating."

"Such big talk from such a little girl," the Crone seethed in response.

Venom had replaced the simple anger in the ancient witch's words.

"If you came back here to get your friends back, then you came for the wrong reasons. I will thank you though, with you here in time for the full red moon, this ritual can continue at its full power."

the Crone studied Ba'el for a moment longer, then broke out into a wicked cackle.

"Hee hee heeeeee! You really did come here to fight? Don't be absurd. You might have gotten some of your powers back, but you've spent so many years draining away. All these years, since you left me, ABANDONED ME-"

Her sudden scream silenced the room again. Those words continued to echo around and off the walls for some time. She almost threw herself off the balcony, instead she grabbed hold of the railing and leaned off it so that she could bring herself as close to the demon

she raged at. Her breathing was heavy, but she regained her composure eventually.

She coughed once to clear her hoarse throat then continued like nothing had happened, “All those years, I grew stronger. While you sleep and hid away, I ran from the Church's dogs in fear of my life for centuries. I gathered all the strength I could and soon I was too powerful for even the Church to handle. Now I am the master, and you will do my bidding. You will bring about MY world. You've already given up on yours, so stop pretending you are the demon I knew so long ago. I don't see a terrifying behemoth in front of me. I only see just another scared little child who buried her head in the sand for a thousand years.”

Ba'el's fists clenched. The dinner tables and chairs of three hundred witches all scooted out-of-the-way at once. They all rose to their feet and a dire amount of energy was focused on just one spot, where we were standing.

“You're outnumbered. You'll be blown to pieces before you take just one more step, Demon... Having your pieces, while not what I wanted, will serve me well enough.”

The demon did not back down at all. She stood there with her eyes fixed on the Crone. Perhaps Ba'el was just that confident. One slip might end her, but she was sure she possessed the strength to end the Crone if she must... Would she survive what happened afterwards?

Wait. She wasn't going to use me as a shield was she-

“Fu fu fu fu~” A laugh echoed from every direction at once.

Everyone in the cavern, from the witches, the Crone and Ba'el herself stopped and looked around. No one seemed to know who was laughing or where it came from. Their confusion told me that no one had planned for it either... But I knew that laugh.

A shadow descended from the opening above. Something, someone large, squeezed through and fell toward the floor. Someone who was balled up and executing a perfect series of front flips. A long tail was trailing out behind it. Only a few meters from the ground, the figure unfurled, a massive wingspan spreading out. It produced enough resistance to slow her fall, and a cloud of dust kicked up as though a helicopter were landing. She was still falling fast and was heavy, so when she touched down the ground shook. With on knee on the floor, she pulled the wings back and cloaked herself with them.

The voice spoke, “Skulking in the darkness. Fleeing the light. Preying upon the weak and ferrying them away for your villainous designs...”

Bathed in the red light of the moon, she slowly stood upright, tall and steadfast. It was Chris.

“Justice will not abide! Righteousness will not suffer your deeds any longer!”

With both wings, she spread out into an extravagant pose. The white scarf around her neck billowed dramatically behind her.

“The Red Knight flies. Evil be sundered!”

From the darkness behind her, just outside the red light from the moon, another figure materialized. Smaller, but more graceful, she emerged and stood beside Chris.

Her quiet voice carried in the cavern's acoustics, “Shadows hide you. Shadows guide you. Shadows be your hearts.”

With arms raised, just like a mantis, the girl struck her own pose. She even raised one leg and crossed its knee in front of the other thigh.

Her voice was still quiet and monotonous as she finished her prepared lines, “Shadows will not hide you from... Green Knight. Evil be sundered.”

There was no mistaking it, Minte had leaped out from the shadows just after Chris. But that meant-

“HA HA HA!” A roar suddenly cackled.

From a ledge up higher than the balconies of the witches, a streak of fire roared across the sky. With reckless abandon, it fell upon the ground beside Minte with a crash. Unaffected by a leap from even that height, the living flame crossed her arms, legs shoulder width apart. A fiery armor scaled tail behind spit embers into the air as it whipped back and forth.

“Your magics won't save you now! You ran from a square fight, now you're gonna get alight!”

Pulling one fist to her waist and pumping the other once in the air, she gave off a single flare of fire and light from her tail, then punched the air in front of her, striking her own pose beside the other two.

“The Red Knight burns! Evil-”

“What?” Chris yelled, turning her head. “I'm the Red Knight!”

It was Rose alright...

Chris abandoned her pose and turned toward the salamander who had not yet given up on her own.

“You're supposed to be the Yellow Knight!”

That got Rose's attention. Now she turned to face Chris. She broke her pose and stomped right on over to, and into, Chris's face.

“Yellow? Ya calling me a coward? If anyone is gonna be red, it's me!”

“This isn't about what color you actually are!” Chris screamed, throwing her wings up into the air. “We drew straws!”

“Well, I didn't lose either way,” Rose growled.

“You did lose. Best two out of three.”

“Five.”

“I said three!”

“I'm not defeated until I say I am,” Rose boasted, thrusting her thumb into her chest with pride. “We were pulling five times, and you gave up early, so you forfeit. If anybody is wrong, it's you for going first and taking my spot!... Blue.”

Chris refused to give in, she leaned over to mash her forehead against Rose's, “I AM NOT BLUE! You said best of five after losing twice!... In a row!”

“If anyone is gonna be red it's me,” Rose repeated herself, refusing to relinquish the role.

“Red is the leader, and this was my idea, so I get to be red!”

Neither was backing down. Chris put more and more strength into it. Rose's flame grew higher and burned brighter. Their foreheads began to make sounds like two mill wheels rubbing together. They bared their teeth at one another and growled like dogs fighting over a bone. Meanwhile, Minte was wavering back and forth as she tried to balance on her one leg with a straight face. Her mantid abdomen behind her twitched back and forth like a stiff cat's tail, but it didn't seem to solve her problem. She was still striking her pose that put her off any semblance of her center gravity's existence into doubt. Regardless, she persisted while the two of them argued fiercely just in front of her.

Rose's face suddenly let up and so did Chris when she saw it.

“Wait,” Rose said. “Where's Black?”

Chris, also genuinely concerned and a little curious now, backed off from the scrum. Rose turned away to shout into the empty spaces surrounding her.

“Oi! Black? Where ya at? It's your turn! Hey! HEY! Susie!”

“DON'T CALL ME THAT!” A voice shouted out in anger.

Susie- I mean Shoshanah leaped up from behind a rock near where Minte had emerged from the shadows. The anubis realized right away what she had done, and her face flushed red and contorted in self-deprecation over exposing herself so easily. The poor girl must have been hiding in embarrassment just a moment ago. I wished I could now do the same. Since there was no point in slinking back into cover, she reluctantly carried herself over to the other three, but refused to speak or even strike a pose. That caused Chris and Rose to turn their attention to her, but their voices mingled into one chaotic mess, and I couldn't make any of it out from where I was standing.

I had promised help, but... But this was too much. Even the congregation of witches were all looking on with stupid looks on their faces. They didn't seem ready to accept what was happening in front

of them. Partly because their secret lair had been discovered unexpectedly, partly because of all the absurdity happening below them.

"Hey," I heard Ba'el speak up. "That's them, ain't it?"

I didn't want to look, but I couldn't not. When I looked over at Ba'el, she had an expression that showed me what she was thinking better than she could hope to say it: 'Are you fucking kidding me?'

I fumbled for words to answer her, "N-no. Don't be silly. I have no idea who-"

When I pried my eyes off the incredulous Ba'el, I made eye contact with Minte. She was still standing there, wavering back and forth. The fight right in front of her didn't phase her at all. A look of relief formed on her stoic otherwise emotionless face as she saw me.

"Laven. You're safe," She said meekly with a tiny smile.

Even though they were right in the middle of a heated exchange, the other three stopped in their tracks at the mere mention of my name. They took one look at Minte, then followed her gaze toward me. Their angry faces melted instantly; relief washed over them, and the all the tension between them died.

"Laven!" Rose shouted, waving her claw excitedly.

"Master!" Chris beamed with a smile and a bow.

Shoshanah's shoulders heaved, and she sighed, "...Laven."

She seemed more embarrassed than relieved to tell the truth.

As though my head was on rusty gears, my head creaked back down to look at Ba'el whose eyes I could feel drilling into the side of my head. Her face was completely unchanged, but she raised an eyebrow at me. I could only give a weak smile and laugh. Hastily, I turned my head away. My smile and optimism: gone.

I muttered through my teeth, "God dammit."

Chapter 79

Only a few minutes ago the cavern served as the cradle for the Crone's designs, now it was the site of a circus. The lair was once pulsating with foul energies and menacing with dark intent. Now it was a stage for Rose, Chris, Shoshanah to argue on while Minte did a balancing act behind them. They had barged in heroically but were mimicking a Three Stooges skit rather than staging a daring rescue. Hundreds of witches looked on in abject confusion. Even Ba'el and I had long since slipped from the center of attention. Neither of us could do anything aside from stare on like everyone else.

I think I was the only individual in the entire room who had fully processed what was going on in front of me. Being able to figure out what the hell was going on in a situation like this was never something I wanted. It made me feel left out.

As their argument became more heated by the second, steam begun rising from the Crone's ears. It was her party, but she had fallen into the background like a paltry opening act for the main event. Red and Black fled for their lives when the ancient witch flipped the table before her and everything on it went along for the ride. The clatter of wood, breaking of glass and wasting of food was finally enough to break the deadlock argument raging among her party crashers.

“What is the meaning of this!?” She screamed, her patience long since evaporated.

Chris was the first one to turn and face the Crone. Rose stayed back, satisfied to just throw the witch a mean glace for interrupting her mid sentence. Shoshanah tried in vain to stop the wyvern before she started talking. There wasn't anything that was going to stop her when she did. She got no help from Minte who was still standing awkwardly on one leg. Her efforts to keep their original plan going were admirable, but the motions of her antenna forewarned me that she was indeed ready for action at the drop of a hat.

In all their bedlam, it was the second worst person who could be speaking for them that addressed the fuming witch.

Chris puffed out her ample chest and commanded, “We are here to stop your nefarious plans, villain!”

She threw her right wing and claw out with flair to point dramatically toward the Crone.

“Release your prisoners at once and you will be-”

“Be quiet you bumbling simpleton!” Susan shouted from behind the wyvern's back. “Our original plan was to-”

The anubis' voice became muffled behind the great wyvern's back and was drowned out when she resumed to shout out in her booming voice.

“Your followers will be spared, if only you turn yourself in!”

At least she had taken her advice to heart. It didn't stop Shoshanah from continuing to simmer behind Chris.

the Crone didn't miss a beat, “Surrender? Never!”

The sound of steel and leather echoed in the cavern as Rose drew her sword from the scabbard on her back.

“Diplomacy has failed!”

There was a tinge of feigned distress in her voice, yet she couldn't hide the eagerness in it while she dropped down into an aggressive stance. Her tail's flame popped and erupted. Embers sprayed forth like an agitated campfire which betrayed her excitement. The crackle of fire was matched by a buzzing and low hum from the magical energies swirling around the wands and staves belonging to dozens of witches. I could still pick out Shoshanah's audible exasperation through all the chaos.

“Calm yourself, you battle glutinous moron!” Susan shouted, trying to speak over the uproarious din spiraling out of her control.

the Crone's voice was heavy with haughtiness, “You lot must be with that man. I thought of you as dangerous warriors, not fools. Do you believe the four of you stand a chance in stopping us?”

Chris's mighty talon stomped into the earth. With her wings, she began to take pose after pose and shadow box and kick the air... She was performing her war dance and 'hero of justice' shtick again.

“A hundred witches or three times that, it doesn't matter, Crone!” Chris said with genuine confidence. “You sealed your end when you forsook justice! Now her agents have arrived to dispense the righteous end to your foul crusade against the innocents of this land.”

And there she goes. On and on Chris begun to drone. Even I phased out for a few seconds, only to snap back to attention when I saw something stir out of the corner of my eye.

“-If you think you can prevail, you'll only prolong your inevitable clash with the world as it approaches balance. A balance in which the lives of The Marches continue on-”

the Crone's patience ran out. With a wave of her hand she directed the large hat wearing lieutenants near her to ready themselves and take aim. It was a subtle and underhanded motion; I didn't notice it until I saw the light pulse off the wand and staff of two witches. Chris was too wrapped up in her act that she didn't notice, and it was too late for me to yell out. A barrage of white missiles not so dissimilar from fireworks streaked and screamed across the sky. They impacted against the ground where the wyvern stood. Her tall frame and wide green wings vanished behind a flash of light and cloud of dust and rocky debris the resulting explosion kicked up.

I threw my arm up in front of my eyes on reflex, but I couldn't

save my ears from the head-splitting echo which bounced around the interior of the cavern. The lingering ear piercing explosion hung around almost as long as the cloud of dust it kicked up. As the dust cleared and settled, and granules of sand and pebbles rained back down, so too were the smug grins on the faces of the witches wiped clean.

Standing tall and unbowed at the center of the explosion was Chris. Her pastel pink hair was tousled, covered in grey soot, and her skin and scales had patches of black soot all over it. Other than a few superficial scratches, the wyvern had not been harmed at all. Her head was slumped forward, and a shadow was spread across her eyes. Chris's talons clenched and raked across the pot marked limestone. I watched and heard them gouging little canyons in the cavern floor. The grinding sound replaced the silence and sound of falling debris and put a premature end to any celebration from the audience.

I turned back around and got one clear look at the Crone and her lieutenants. They expected more from that, perhaps they expected that was all they had to do. Their leader's furious and now unsubtle hand waves urged and commanded them to prepare another volley. I knew better.

With a hand on Ba'el's shoulder to get her attention, I urged her with a whisper, “Get out of the way.”

She turned her head up to me with a confused expression on her face.

“Huh?”

I didn't think we had time for me to repeat myself, so I grabbed hold of the little demon and shouted, “Get down!”

I threw my weight on the unsuspecting Ba'el, so we both went tumbling to the ground together. She swore as I did so and swore even louder when I landed on top of her. As we both rolled clear, the wyvern's voice became a growl instead of a steadfast and heroic diatribe against injustice. I heard her lungs fill with air even as far as away as I was. When our roll ended, I looked back just in time to see Chris's head whip back, her hair tossing and shaking the grey soot free. She stomped forward, digging her one talon back into the earth. Chris threw her head forward, mouth opened wide. The glowing heat in the back of her throat was clear for everyone to see. A fire smouldered there before it jetted outward. A stream of fire roared and spayed the balconies in burning napalm.

The witches scattered and the Crone vanished behind the flames before my eyes. Yet even I could still feel her presence. All around the room the witches scampered to their feet. They ran, flipped over their own tables for cover, jumped and flew in every direction as Chris continued to turn around and ravage the entire cavern for as far as her jet of flame could reach. As her flame burned, black smoke filled

the enclosed space. The only ventilation for this place was the skylight where the red moon glowed, and that wasn't enough.

"Alright!" Rose's cheer rose above the chaos.

With her sword drawn, she charged forward. I watched her leap, but the smoke blocked my view before I could see her actually crash into the fray.

The circus had been cancelled and so too was the dinner theater. I choked on the black fumes from Chris's fire and everything it burned. Ba'el choked below me. Maybe because I was still laying on top of her.

"Get off me, you idiot!" She protested.

The demon didn't need to shout nor have me do anything. It was warning, not a request. With just a roll of her shoulder, she shoved me off with ease before I was of the right mind to try standing back up. But with the smoke still lingering, I had to kept crouched and low.

"Alright, I'll admit it. These friends of yours actually do have the right idea," Ba'el said when she calmed down. "You get them up to speed. I'll take care of the Crone."

"Alone?" I asked, then coughed violently. "You know she still needs you for the ritual. Why give her that chance to-?"

"the Crone is my business, Laven," she said sternly and without mischievous pretense which was ever present in her usual tone. "Whatever that ritual does to those children and this place is your business."

What she was saying now seemed to be contradictory to what she blamed herself for earlier.

"Then what was all that about-"

"I'm putting my house in order, you get yours in order!"

I was about to press her more, but all it took was a simple palm strike against my chest to send me flying backwards. My screams as I flew were drowned out by the growing sound of a melee and the crunch of my bones as I dropped back down to the ground. I finally rolled to a stop far from the action but not out of range of it. The hit wasn't meant to break me, nor did it, but it was still impossibility strong, and it hurt. A lot. At least it wasn't a wall that stopped me this time.

There wasn't any time to roll around on the cavern floor. Steel against stone, wood and clothes clamored, and the ring, wiz and gleam of magic flew above my head and all around me. A few ricochets of magic missiles, balls of hail and orbs of flame smashed and broke upon the ground near me. It was more than enough to get me scrambling up off the floor and diving for cover behind some boulders. I wasn't sure if someone was aiming for me or if I was in collateral damage hell. No one seemed to know who or what they were shooting at anymore, so I kept my head down.

I heard something shuffle beside me. Someone else plopped right down next to me. I turned around to see a familiar head of long silky black hair. Susi- Shoshanah had taken cover beside me. Likely she saw me go airborne and hurried her way to me. Now the two of us had our backs to this boulder, slowing being chipped away by magic with our butts planted on the floor, and our legs sprawled out, both beaten and exhausted.

I couldn't see her eyes through her bangs. Her eyes were staring downward at the floor, toward where her tail rested between her legs. A paw reached out and weakly grabbed hold of my sleeve.

"I regret sortieing you alone for this endeavor," she said at last.

I didn't quite recognize the apologetic tone in her voice. This might be her tired voice. I got the impression she wasn't showing her eyes because they may just be as hollow as her voice was. It still showed; she couldn't hide the bags under her eyes. Had she been worried sick this whole time? Did she have regrets for doing what seemed outlandish but possibly among a limited number of options we had to get this far?

It was probably being alone with the other three was just something that stretched her patience and sanity to their limits.

I lightly shook her paw off then reached out with my hand and placed it on top of her head. With a gentle caress, I pet her. My hand ruffled the hair between her two tall jackal ears that twitched as my hand moved.

"Apology accepted," I replied.

Shoshanah's tail wagged back and forth between her legs. A long sigh escaped her lips, and a metric ton of stress rolled off those shoulders. Did I even spy a little smile in the corner of her-?

Her paw reached back up, grabbed hold of my hand still petting her head and pulled it away. The anubis' piercing red eyes finally turned to look at me with a professional seriousness to them that I had long since become accustomed to.

"We haven't much time at our disposal, Laven," she said clinically.

The girl was right; I could not argue with that. While we took refuge, a battle raged behind us. We stared at one another for a moment longer, allowing the last few feeling of reuniting blow over so we could get to work. There would be much work to be done before either of us could celebrate anything. A lot could still be lost this night if we kept cowering. With a nod, the two of us turned around and peered over the boulder.

At the far side of the cavern, I spotted Ba'el after much searching through the remaining pillars of black smoke. She was

walking slowly, methodically, toward the biggest hat of them all, the Crone. The ancient witch stood alone, waiting for the demon to approach. I could make out their jaws flapping, but I could not hope to hear nor read into what they were saying. I could only imagine they were still exchanging the same words in different order. There would be no reconciliation between them. The melody changes but not the tone.

the Crone produced her staff from thin air through a game of magic sleight of hand. A plain shaft of wood with a gnarled wooden knot at the end.

"Ha!" Susan laughed. "I kept telling that ignominious that she was not of green skin, hooked nose and warts for days."

My eyes traveled back over to the anubis who had a slight grin on her face and a chest puffed out with pride. I recalled an argument between her and Chris some time ago, but I hardly think this was the time to bring that up. She quickly noticed me staring at her, chastising her with my eyes. A light blush formed on her tanned cheeks, then she coughed nonchalantly.

Ba'el approached, and I watched a purplish-black gate open in the air above her. It was some kind of portal. A huge metal object slowly descended from it till it cleared the dark gate then suddenly fell through and crashed into the ground beside her. It appeared to be some sort of scythe, but it was bigger than she was. The straight shaft was taller than her, and the curved blade was also just as long.

Compared to the Crone's unbecoming and simple staff, Ba'el's weapon was far more sinister and foreboding. It was a tool that had long since departed the idea of harvesting crops. The staff was gaudy, ornamental yet practical, solid. The blade itself was far more fantastical. It looked like something from another world entirely. Not so far-fetched after considering it appeared from somewhere else. It had serrated curves eating into the blade and whole pieces of metal missing along its edge, yet it held together and even survived slamming into the ground without so much as warping. It was heavy but sharp looking. Where it connected to the staff, a corner of the blade had been replaced by a glowing and spinning green orb, just like the ones she used as the catalyst for her spells.

She hefted the weapon with ease and slung it over her shoulder. I did not know what it was made out of, but that thing must weigh over two dozen kilos at least. It was far too much for any practical weapon; swinging it around should be a nightmare of a chore. That didn't matter to the strength that little girl commanded. The Crone was not deterred. I did not know the kind of strength she had in her childish arms, but there must be more than enough magic in that little frame of hers to square off against the baphomet.

“Laven,” Shoshanah spoke and reigned in my attention. “What manner of demon is that?”

“You remember that little lecture of yours about witches and demons? Well, that's the Crone's old demon master.”

I looked back over and saw those red eyes of hers opened wide.

I pressed on quickly to alleviate those fears of hers, “A rebelling demon. She's here to take out the Crone. We just need to let her.”

Shoshanah's eyes narrowed, now glaring at me, telling me that she was not convinced - nor amused.

“That weird little plan of ours worked but only because she brought me along for the ride herself when they snatched all those kids. That demon was disguised as one of them, hid herself in my shadow and only revealed herself to save my life and have us both escape... She even left a trail for you to find this place... Look, I'll explain myself afterword. Just let them fight it out.”

“'Myself?... Explain yourself, Laven.”

I choked a little and blushed. That was a bad choice of words. Especially around Susan who picked up on it in an instant.

“Just forget about those two for now. We need to stop that rit-”

A whoosh of air from behind stopped me in my tracks.

I heard a child's voice from behind, “There he is, the grade-A hostage!”

Behind me were two witches, floating in the air. As they spoke, they touched down, dismounted their flying staffs and pointed their wands toward us. Their wide hats were larger than average, another pair of the other Crone's own lieutenants. They were far more organized and prepared than all the other witches. Even through all the chaos they singled me out and saw me as the weakest link out of all their intruders. It happened all at once.

Glowing light formed at the tips, I threw up my arms to cover my face while Shoshanah's own arms moved, trying to form a shield of transparent golden light between us and them. She wouldn't be fast enough. There was a flash of light, but it was more a fizzle. A short circuit that let off a pop, crackle and puff of smoke from the end of their magic wands. The energy of their spells blew backward into their faces, and the two little witches yelped in surprise. Two pieces of wood clattered to the ground below, cut clean off the rest of the shaft. With barely a sound, two dainty feet planted themselves between the four of us.

It was Minte; there was no mistaking it. I saw the light prismatic glint of her wings as they buzzed and folded back into her mantid

abdomen long before I noticed more than the shadow of the girl herself. She had dropped down from nowhere. Her arm blades were drawn, but with a snikt they snapped back into place against her arms. With a graceful pirouette, she spun back around to face the witches, the tattered hems of her bodysuit which ended more like a dress danced dangerously close with her panty-line.

The two witches recoiled but recovered quickly enough. Minte watched them, her antenna wildly active above her head as they felt the air for danger. Yet she didn't seem too concerned or pressed for time when the two witch lieutenants readied themselves to attack again. The moment they moved I understood why. What were once seamless and invisible gashes in their big hats and black witch's robes split and their clothes down to their underwear exploded into tatters. They looked down, gasped and screamed in surprise. Long enough for one of the assassin's deadly legs to connect with the left witch's shoulder in a brutal full roundhouse. A flash of light sparked off her magic barrier at the point of impact, and she was sent crashing violently into her partner while Minte's leg followed through. Both their bodies clonked against one another and were sent flying. They sprawled on the ground in the distance, twitching, as they dog-piled on each other.

Minte's roundhouse continued; she had to follow through one more revolution because of her devastating kick's momentum. She spun around—her dress's hem once again flirting with the wind—and finally stopped when she was once again facing me.

I could not hide the relieved smile on my face.

All the tension left my body with a sigh, "Minte-"

"-Thank you for assistance," Shoshanah said, also sighing in relief.

Minte silently gave us a single thumbs up with a blank expression on her face.

I quickly ducked back behind the boulder, Shoshanah followed and Minte squat down to mimic us both. We didn't need to attract any more attention.

"Minte, you're here, good. I need to make sure everyone knows what's going on. For now, leave the Crone alone. Let the girl with the horns and her duke it out. We got bigger fish to fry."

"Then be quick about it, Laven," Shoshanah said urgently. "We are still at a loss to the Crone plot."

Out of concern, I peeked my head one more time around the boulder and saw just as Ba'el and the Crone rushed forward and crashed into one another. If I hadn't seen it happen, I may have assumed I heard the entire cave coming down. It was more like a thunderclap than two little girls tackling one anotherThe Crone's

enchanted staff blocked the downward swing of Ba'el's scythe which pushed aside the air as it dropped faster than it had any right to given its size. I ducked back behind the boulder, and the thunder resounded every ten seconds or so. Their battle had finally begun, so I'd have to keep to my word and begin my own.

"Conquest," I said, carefully looking into Minte then Shoshanah's eyes when I said it.

I didn't want my words to be misinterpreted as hyperbole.

"the Crone is fueling a ritual with the Red Moon, just like we thought, but it isn't to summon any demon. She doesn't even need it to do that. What she is doing with it is much worse." I pointed down toward the ground as I spoke now. "Far below these caverns is a giant reservoir of water. Before that is a bunch of machinery and magic doodads I couldn't make heads or tails of."

"The March's irrigation systems," Shoshanah muttered.

"Exactly," I said, not totally surprised she would pick on it so fast. "the Crone is looking to poison it. Not just any poison though. She's going to turn it into a big 'fountain of youth'. Any woman who drinks it will become like all of them: a witch. It will have so much magic in it that it will blow their life force and 'souls' right out of them, replacing it with the same stuff that fills the body of every witch you see here now. All the men will go mad with lust afterword and the entirety of The Marches will be one big demon realm."

Susan voiced her disbelief at first, "Such a spell would require a preposterous amount of magic power and mana to-"

But she stopped when something dawned on her.

"Magical... doodads?" She asked, repeating my choice of words awkwardly.

Maybe the idea forming in her head had just dawned on me too, "You don't think that-?"

"Row upon row of devices once used to power a system irrigate the waters of life throughout The Marches, correct? 'Tis just one location, however, if the others have since long been forgotten, degraded or rendered inoperable-"

"-Then she's going to use whatever power there is to fuel her ritual."

"Yet it requires a sufficient and substantial addition of mana all at once to-"

We both looked at one another and came to the conclusion at once. Minte continued staring at both of us with a blank confused look on her face as her eyes flicked back and forth between us.

"The children!"

Shoshanah continued, her voice speeding up and becoming more and more concerned, "Yet unless the machines are prepared

adequately with a sustained introduction of fresh mana, they would-"

I interrupted her before she finished her thought with dreadful news, "There are already ten of the kidnapped missing,"

"...Then it is ready and merely waits for the stroke of midnight. When the red moon will be at its highest and brightest point."

I watched as she turned back, looked up toward the skylight and started holding out her paws, folding her digits while her lips moved and muttered silently. Shoshanah was doing some sort of complicated calculus in her head with all the numbers and approximate numbers involved in the Crone's ritual. After about ten seconds, she stopped and looked back over at me.

"You claim that her target is The Marches in its entirety. She does not appear to have the power necessary to accomplish such a feat."

"She's only missing one last piece of that puzzle," I said.

My finger pointed slowly toward Ba'el and the Crone who were circling around one another before readying to lunge at one another again.

"The demon?"

"That's right."

"Why run the risk of capture by engaging- Laven?"

She turned toward me and threw me a hostile glare. It was obvious she was more than a little ticked off.

"What?" I shot back. "She said she was going to follow through with settling an old score of hers. I couldn't convince her, and I certainly couldn't stop her."

While I defended myself Ba'el and the Crone clashed once again. The demon's first strike missed; the agile witch merely floated over the floor and flew to dodge the powerful attack which shattered earth on impact. While the edge of her scythe had devastated the stone floor, the ancient witch let loose a barrage of magic projectiles from several rotating pentagrams behind her. The demon weathered the blows by just shielding her head and torso the best she could with one arm. Afterwards, she pointed and fired a ray of blistering magic which forced the Crone to pull back and retreat. The ray did not stop until he exploded against wall behind the Crone, which cracked and shattered as a layer fell to the ground. While Ba'el pursued her, she slammed her fist into the wall which the Crone also just managed to dodge.

I looked back at the anubis incredulously. A moment of awkwardness lingered in the air between us even as the din of battle raged all around us.

"...Fair enough," She said, eventually.

We both slowly slid back into cover. Now we needed some sort

of plan.

"We're going to have to go all out," I said. "I think we got an advantage for now. These witches don't look well trained for war no matter how powerful they may be. They are scattering for now, but they'll rally and organize eventually. I don't think we can take on their sheer numbers. Before that happens, we'll need to stop that ritual and get those children out of here."

"Fight seriously against children?" Shoshanah asked accusingly.

"They might look like children; but believe me, most of the witches here are adults deep down. Even if they don't look or act like it. If we take them lightly we'll-"

A chorus of shrieks pierced the air. I poked my head back discretely out of cover and so did Susan with her head hovering just above mine. We both spotted Chris at the same time, who was still busy raging.

"Come to me villains! Come and let my body be the tool of justice against your crimes. But do not expect mercy, for mercy is the end of justice and you will find no end of me this night!"

As she raged, she kicked, stomped and tossed witches around like rag dolls. They tried to blast her point blank with spells, dog pile her and constrain her with ropes and chains made of magical energy, but they continued to fail. She booted them into the air, broke their staffs and wands with a slice of her talons, clotheslined others with her wings and picked other off with whip-like lashes of her long dragon tail. She spat orbs of fire into the air which exploded into fiery flak, knocking those flying above off course or out of the air. It was no different from watching an old monster movie, the only thing missing was the paper mache city to knock over.

I pulled back behind the rock and so did Susan. We looked at one another with the same mildly horrified expression on our faces.

"O-okay..." I struggled to say. "But you saw those protective barriers, right? The same sort of thing is keeping those kids we need to get out of here imprisoned. They even blocked Minte's kick and stopped them from being seriously harmed. Even if you still think they look like kids, if you pull your punches they-"

While I continued to speak, I poked my head out on the other side of the boulder, as did Susan. There I saw Rose, standing among the dispatched bodies of several witches surrounding her on the ground. In her arms, she was holding up a single witch high up in the air by the back of her robe.

"Hey!" She shouted toward Chris. "Their little shiny doohickeys don't protect against themselves."

While she held onto one elbow of the witch in her grasp, she

shoved the rest of the arm and hand into the witch's own face. There was no reaction from the shield as the poor girl was forced to hit herself in the face over and over again. Her face has long since turned black and blue with an ugly swollen right eye and bleeding nose. Somehow, she had yet to pass out, so the tears in her eyes from the pain were still fresh.

I pulled back behind the rock again. I met Shoshanah's own expression with an equally morbid expression.

"I'm just going to stop talking now."

"I believe that would be for the best, Laven."

After witnessing all that callous brutality, I felt like we had become the villains at some point. Yet that didn't make the fact that the ritual was still set to begin at any moment.

"Shoshanah. If we can get you to the ritual, can you stop it?"

I watched her eyes dart around inside her head. They moved as though she were reading an invisible book in front of her. Every so often she glanced over at the sigils in the distance and mumbled quietly to herself while cooking up some sort of theory, some sort of plan inside her head.

"...Foci far below and amplifier high above... Properties of still pure waster... Living reagents and mana infused chalk, superficial. Engravings, carved in the stone... Unique design, singular application, complicated... Redundant for fail safes... Yet delicate..."

Her eyes widened for a moment then slowly calmed themselves back down. A few nods and last murmurs to herself as though she needed to convince herself about what she had just thought. She looked at me directly and in a very matter of fact manner made a solemn swear.

"If that is what you wish, then it will be done."

There was a seriousness in her face and confidence in her conviction that made me feel a hell of a lot better. With a lighter heart, I turned toward Minte who was still watching the two of us silently.

"Minte, I need you to cover Shoshanah. Keep all these witches off of her for as long as possible. Watch everyone's back. Can you do that?"

Minte didn't even hesitate, she simply nodded once.

"Then the two of you get on that."

All three of us stood up, something that neither of them expected.

"Laven, what are you doing?" Susan asked me in a concerned voice.

"I'm going to get Rose and Chris on the same page while you both deal with the ritual."

"It is far too dangerous out there!" She protested.

“It's dangerous everywhere. Right now, I'm more worried about those kids. We need to break them out of there, then get all of us the hell out of here. You two just worry about taking that spell down; you leave Rose and Chris to me.”

“But-!”

Minte placed her hand on the anubis' shoulder. She looked over at the mantis, who stared at her, telling the priestess to let it be. Shoshanah bit her lip then swallowed her next words. She turned around, didn't once look back and broke out of cover. She sprinted left across to the opposite side of the cavern, toward the glowing patterns on the floor. She was harried by random far-flung spells and dodged them all the way, but she had more than enough of her own power to bat them aside with her own magical, gold defensive shield. Minte gave me one last look before she followed her, taking great leaps and quickly vanishing into the shadows.

It wasn't safe for me to just stand around, so I ran right toward the source of the flames burning up the entire cavern. I dodged all the spells, infernos and potholes while keeping as low a profile as I could. Still battling in the distance was Ba'el and the Crone whose battle tore up the very ground they fought upon. There was no way to get close that would be good for my health, so I steered clear and made a beeline right for Rose. I was worried she might soon get the idea to stick her neck into those two Sabbath titans' business.

“Rose!” I shouted as I approached.

When I had finally gotten close enough that my voice could be heard over all the chaos, she had just finishing beating a witch over the head with the pommel of her sword. With the girl knocked out cold on the floor among several others, she turned to the sound of my voice and greeted me with a wide smile.

“Laven- whoa!”

I didn't stop running. Stopping would be a bad idea, so I kept going. As I passed her by, I grabbed hold of her left wrist and dragged her along with me. I pulled the salamander along and dove behind a nearby pillar, away from all the carnage going on. Rose offered little resistance; she allowed me to pull her along. She must think it was all part of some game.

“Laven! This is the best fun I've had in ages. These kids pack a lot of punch for their size even if they don't fight so good. And they just keep coming.” She flashed me an even brighter smile as she pointed to the chaos with glee. “Come on, the two of us could-”

I pulled her closer, then up against the pillar. With my hands on each side of her head I leaned in. I needed Rose to be still and listen for a moment. She was still burning bright; her tail was alive with energy.

“Rose. I need you to listen and listen closely.”

Rose went quiet. Her expression was a little confused now. She had been caught off guard, and it showed. The smile wiped from her face while she looked up me with an uncharacteristically meek expression and nodded. I couldn't stop to be any more polite than I already was... I especially needed to ignore the hint of red on her cheeks.

“Rose we-”

A loud explosion and pulverization of rock quickly shut me up. The wall just fifteen meters away crumbled. Clouds of rock and dust billowed out from the impact crater and washed over Rose and me. After I pulled my arm away from my face which I used to shield debris from getting into my eyes, I saw the Crone with her back against the wall. Ba'el was on top, trying to crush the witch under her scythe's shaft. The demon's opponent fought back against her raw physical strength with glowing feet bathed in red energy and her own staff crossed with Ba'el's. The little witch's boots roared with the force of a jet engine, so they didn't even fully touch the ground. She desperately tried pushing back against Ba'el by flying in the opposite direction as strongly as she was able to.

The deadlock was broken when another series of red glowing pentagrams floated out from behind the Crone's back and fired at Ba'el from point blank. The demon had to lean back to dodge them, but that also meant she lost her leverage on the Crone. She knew this was coming though, so as she leaned back, she fell onto her own back. The witch shot forward but was sent flying instead of reversing the pin when Ba'el's hoof connected with her stomach and flung her opponent toward the other end of the cavern. The baphomet completed her roll, stood back upright, then chased after her.

Had that been a little more to the left, the two of us may have been pulverized instead. That didn't seem to concern Rose in the least. Her meek expression had vanished in an instant. She had witnessed the intensity of the fight and got excited. Without thinking, she tried to follow the both of them, but I kept my arm steady to block her way and pushed her back up against the pillar. Rose puffed out her cheeks and pouted when I reigned her in.

I continued where I left off, “Rose, concentrate. We're here to rescue these kids. We can't spend all night fighting these witches. There are too many of them. This is a raid, not a battle. Got that? They may be scattered now, but we can't hope to deal with them when they rally later.”

Rose's eyes dropped low, “I know that. That's why I was trying to get all the fun I could now.”

Alright. We're not at square one then. That's a plus. She was at

least taking this all semi-seriously.

"If we don't stop them here-"

I peered toward the opposite end of the cavern where Minte and Susan had run. In the distance, I could see the priestess had reached the collection of pentagrams, circles and runes making up the complicated circuitry of the Crone's masterwork spell. Protected by barriers so great they were clearly visible, several witches sat crossed legged among the circles in trances. Their incantations held the magic together as the evening carried on till when the red moon would be at its fullest and reddest.

"-Then they are going to turn The Marches into a war zone. The Crone will bleed those kids dry, turn them into her minions against their will, then use them as soldiers to conquer everything in this little corner of The Empire."

Shoshanah held out a paw and countless particles of gold light materialized from thin air around her. They all fell together into the shape of a staff, and once they had all gathered, her golden scale staff solidified into existence. Armed with her trusty staff, she lifted it up high into the air with both paws, bottom pointed down, and slammed it into the ground. A loud metallic ring echoed off the walls, and an aura of brilliant light radiated off of her. I could see the shadows and reflections on the walls from her own magic circles which formed under her. Intricate hieroglyphics and other runes which were undecipherable to me.

It did not go unnoticed by the Crone's goons. Those which were not licking their wounds or fleeing recognized the threat and moved to interrupt her. They only rushed headlong into Minte who would appear, quick as lightning, from the shadows. Her strikes were quick, brutal and precise. She cut their weapons apart and sent their tiny frames flying with single kicks. A few stray spells reached Susan, but her own golden barrier had them glancing off harmlessly. I feared what any direct hit would do though. Our time was indeed limited.

That did not dishearten the assassin though. When they turned their attention to her, I watched as her arm blades sliced their magical projectiles in half. All their energy could do nothing to those sharp blades. Two halves of a magic missile split in front of her, drifted off to the sides and curved away from the anubis chanting and casting behind her. Chris has since taken to the air and was circling about the cavern, still wreaking havoc. Our window was short, but it was solid for now. But I couldn't keep Rose still for long. While I had been watching, she too had glanced over at the sight of the battle. It nearly caused her to salivate, and the heat radiating off her tail was starting to grow too much for even me to handle

And I was mostly used to it by now.

“If that spells goes off, The Church of the Almighty are going to descend upon this place. Their crusade will tear this land apart. I think the people living in this place have it rough as is, but they don't need those lives of theirs torn apart on top of that. They don't deserve-”

I looked back at Rose, who was now looking back at me with a glimmer in her eyes. I could swear there were sparkles dancing about her face as well... I think I had chosen the wrong words given my audience. Tales of war and strife was this girl's dream, not a nightmare.

“Rose! Focus!”

I pinched Rose's left cheek between my thumb and index finger and pulled. She flailed and waved her arms in protest.

“Ow ow ow ow ow! Owkay! Owkay!” She slurred in pain.

There were little tears in her eyes when I let go, but I wasn't sure if they were crocodile tears or not. She rubbed her raw cheek with one claw trying to nurse it better.

“If this whole place gets blockaded, if the whole world weighs down on us, that means this adventure is at an end.”

Rose's face went pale. I didn't expect such a sudden breakneck turn in her attitude.

“...You mean that?” She asked timidly.

“Yes. Now we need to get back out there and save those kids. Leave the Crone to the demon too. Their fight is private. Got it? Concentrate on giving Susan room and keeping those kids safe. You follow me?”

“Mmmmm,” Rose pouted. “Alright. For you, husband, I can do that. Just this once.”

The look on her face was apprehensive, but the color returned to her face and she smiled again. I didn't have any reason to doubt her words were true. Not after she called me- No. Leave that be for now.

Ringing above the din of the battle, a foreboding drumming of energy got much louder. The glint and ring of Shoshanah's magic was swallowed up by it. When I looked back toward the opposite side of the room, I saw her sigils, magic circles and hieroglyphics were being squeezed and pushed back one by one. The red pentagrams of the Crone's spell were now fighting back. They were eaten up one by one until the only one left was the one the priestess was standing upon. Even from so far away, I could see she was in pain trying to fight back, and she was forced down onto one knee. The protective barrier surrounding her also flickered as it suddenly weakened and dimmed every few seconds.

From the opening in the roof, the red light got even brighter. As the time for true full moon got closer, so too did the strength of their ritual. Maybe Shoshanah would not be able to stop it at all?

Rose and I exchanged a quick glance. We nodded at one another and then leaped out from behind the cover of the pillar. We'd have to hurry to the other side and help them out. But before we got half way, another crash and explosion of stone shook the cavern. I very nearly fell over when the quake hit, so Rose and I stumbled into a stop. We both looked over at where the explosion had come from and saw Ba'el laying on the ground. Floating above her was the Crone, holding a red chain of magical energy. It was tied around Ba'el's ankle like a lasso, so when she yanked back on it and spun around in the middle of the air, the demon was carried along with it.

Another mighty crash shook the room when the Crone let her grip loose, and the slack caused the demon's momentum to shoot out and fly until she hit a wall. Since Ba'el was stunned, the witch attached another chain around her other ankle, the end of which she held in her other hand. Then she tied both her wrists the same way, all the while swinging the demon around the room and into the ceiling, floor, pillars and wall. When all four of her limbs were restrained, and Ba'el had been embedded into a wall, the Crone hopped through the air on invisible steps toward her.

“I have worked a long time on spells to bind beings like you up. Did you believe that I had earlier used up my only trick?”

Ba'el struggled against the chains but couldn't pull her arms and legs loose.

“Now... Let us both continue where we left off not so long ago. Let us revisit a happier time and what should have happened very long ago.”

Ba'el continued to struggle but could go nowhere. The Crone slipped her leg between her captive's and pressed their bodies together. She held the demon's cheeks in her hands and held her head still, facing forward. All around the witch, a cage with walls made of pentagrams and rune covered circles formed. That ancient witch wasted no time and, despite the captive's struggles, violently pressed her lips against hers. A hum of energy which had not yet been matched rung in my ears. I had to cover them in fear that my ears might bleed at any moment. Rose meanwhile covered her eyes with her claws, but not entirely as she peeked through her fingers.

Everyone had stopped what they were doing to watch this unfold. Something was happening, and it concerned everyone.

Ba'el's eyes widened in surprise, but her eyelids seemed to grow heavier and dropped low. The bright green of her eyes dulled and became lifeless, hollow. The Crone squirmed in ecstasy as she tried to press herself up against the demon more and more. Even I could not stop from blushing. Yet I shouldn't because my heart turned ice cold and felt like it had stopped beating altogether. All the red sigils of the

Crone had their luminosity intensify tenfold. The red darkened into a bloody hue then quickly faded away into nothing.

the Crone pulled back her lips and took a step back to admire her handiwork. Ba'el's head hung low, her body limp and only held up against the wall now by the witch's magic which constrained her.

“Ba'el~” The old witch cooed. “Now we can accomplish together what we have always wanted. Crush these friends of yours and offer up your power to the blood moon... But first...”

She licked her wet lips seductively.

“I've longed to feel your touch for far too long. Come to me, Ba'el~”

Ba'el's body twitched, and the magical chains holding her rattled. Her right arm slowly moved from her side. Her paw rose up into the air; it was limp, lifeless. It shook as it struggled to turn over so that her paw faced upward. It brushed past the Crone's thigh; a sensation that caused the witch to squirm even more and cackle in delight. Her pinky folded into her palm and so did her thumb. The paw's fingers flipped the short skirt of the Crone's robe a bit but kept going. The Crone's smile was frozen on her face but her cackle stopped. Ba'el slowly raised her paw in front of the Crone's face and folded back her index finger. That left only one solitary finger.

“Wha-” the Crone gasped.

The demon raised her head. A glimmer of blue light radiated off her forehead. There was a pentagram of blue glowing brightly there. Her eyes were once again bright green and full of life. Ba'el's expression was still blank.

“Sorry, Crone,” Ba'el said apologetically. “The only 'fingering' you're getting-”

Her middle finger folded back, and her hand was suddenly clenched into a fist.

“-Is a gang bang.”

the Crone sensed danger and reeled backward, but she only caused her body to tense up. A white fanged filled smile spread across Ba'el's face as she pulled back her fist, the chains binding rattling as she moved. With blinding speed, her fist shot outward. The Crone didn't have the time to get away. The red magical chains wrapped around her wrist split apart and shattered uselessly when the demon pushed past their limit. Her fuzzy fist slammed right into the Crone's jaw. The usual glow of her protective shield did not spark. It was an unmitigated direct hit. For a moment, I thought it would knock her jaw clean off her skull. A ripple spread from one side of her face to the other as the shock wave of force hit her full on. Her head turned abruptly and violently to its extreme. The sound the impact made was like an oar slapping against the surface of still lake. It blew every other

sound in the cavern clear out of the water.

And just like a skipping stone on the surface of that still lake, the Crone was sent flying and bouncing off the floor of the cavern. She hit with all the speed of a bullet and bounced along the floor three times until finally colliding with the opposite wall of the cavern some distance away. I thought that the whole wall would come crumbling down on top of her considering how hard she hit it.

Mid-flight, the chains binding Ba'el snapped. There wasn't nearly enough strength in them to prevent the witch from flying away nor drag the demon along with her. While she was still embedded in the wall, I heard Ba'el rudely hocked up a loogie from her throat, swill it in her mouth, then spit. All to wash the taste left from the Crone. She then pulled her arms and legs free, pushed her back and butt free from the wall and dropped back down onto the ground. Dusting herself off briefly, she brushed right past everything and everyone without so much as acknowledging their existence. I and everyone else watched her tattered and torn green cape billow behind her as she walked toward the Crone's crater.

As Ba'el approached, the witch struggled to get back on her feet. Her head had been shaken up so bad that she had completely lost her sense of balance. It took three tries, falling flat on the ground each time, to right herself. With every failure, Ba'el got closer and closer. Her scythe—which had long since flown off into the distance—melted into the floor, and another portal opened before her. When it dropped though to the ground again, she caught it, slung it over her shoulder and continued to slowly make her way across the room.

The witch must have heard the clopping of her hooves get closer and closer because she whipped her head up and glared furiously at the demon. She ground her teeth together in rage. There was a noticeable gap in her dentures now. A tooth seemed to have been knocked out by that brutal punch Ba'el dealt her.

She approached the stumbling witch, “Now, Cronie, let me show you a real bad touch.”

With each step Ba'el took, the room grew progressively redder. I didn't notice it until it was far too late. There was one person who noticed though, that was the Crone. She began cackling like mad, so much so that it stopped even Ba'el in her tracks.

“Hee hee hee hee! Too late. Far toooooo~ late. Ba'el! Remember that moment in time when we just had one another. That one last blissful and innocent moment... BEFORE I KNEW YOU SULLIED YOURSELF!”

The witch made an ugly expression on what was otherwise an incredibly cute face. It contorted with rage and madness while she finally managed to stand tall by keeping her legs spread wide away.

“So you'll deny me my kingdom? So be it. Loss is not unknown to me. I am a survivor. I will triumph. I've done it without you till now. I'll do it from now until forever. Even if I have to make what little I can mine then take what else I need!”

She threw her hands arms into the air; up toward the moon which was now as full as it would get. The entire cavern was bathed in blood red light, and the ritual of hers ceased its idle hum and came alive. The sigils and runes began to move and rotate. A mess of clockwork and mechanical lights etched into the floor. Inside the domed prison, the air became red, almost opaque, and the children there let out muffled screams. They began to sweat, cough and lose strength.

I screamed involuntarily, “No!”

When I tried to run Rose grabbed hold of me. It very nearly tore my own arm off, but I quickly noticed that a wall of witches had already formed to block Rose and me from approaching. She had just stopped me from running right into them. Rose then quickly snapped me back and put herself between us and them.

the Crone's mocking voice continued to rage, “With all the power of the blood moon and the lifeforce for leagues around, I'll have more than enough power to wipe you from existence, Ba'el! When your wretched soul returns to the hell from which you came, you can tell them while they torture and punish you for your crimes, the tale of how I, a mere mortal, cast you down!”

“There!” Someone shouted.

A voice rang clear as day. Everyone turned to see who it was and ended up looking over at Shoshanah. She was drenched in sweat as she had been resisting the push back from the ritual. Her skin glistened in the red light, her hair and fur was matted, yet she stood up again. Regardless of the pain and stress she was enduring, she raised her staff up high and brought it down. The clang of solid gold on stone filled the cavern once again.

No circles or hieroglyphs of her own appeared this time. Instead, out of the thousand red lines in the floor, a few quickly turned from red to gold. They sped out from under Shoshanah, following the paths of least resistance. They snaked their way through the maze until four solid lines of gold glowed toward the cardinal directions. It did not appear to do anything at first, and the ritual continued to grow brighter, but something was wrong.

A spark jumped out from the red lines of magic. It was followed by a whole magic circle imploding then violently pushing back outwards, popping like a balloon. It sent sparks in every direction, a massive firecracker. A few lines of red here and there grew in luminosity quicker than the others, while some died down. One

blowout followed the first, and they kept on coming. All the magical energy was trying to feed through the complex mechanics of the spell, but there were four golden wrenches thrown into the equation. It caused bottlenecks, dams and complete blockages. The witches—which had been sitting in trances—stirred awake. They looked about in panic when the energies flowing through them and around them went haywire. When they lost concentration, the magic circles underneath them exploded and fried them as well. A jolt of electricity knocked them clean out or showered them in sparks as hot as glowing coal.

At the lines connecting the prison and the ritual itself, the biggest and most dangerous short circuit of them all built up and looked ready to pop. Smoke began rising from the ground. On one side of the golden divide the lines got brighter, and on the other they dulled. It was an imbalance which could not last. But instead of the barrier between them breaking, the red lines in the dust exploded. Following that explosion was the sound of broken glass. The dome covering the children in their prison fractured then shattered like glass. Transparent panes of magical glass disintegrated into particles of red light before they even reached the ground.

The only other sound in the whole cavern was the Crone's babbling as she watched it all fall apart.

With the sound of an electric generator winding down, the ritual suddenly ebbed to nothing. The red glow from the floor died; the only red glow was from the now waning face of the red moon.

Shoshanah tried to stay standing, but when the ritual crumbled, she too fell to her knees. She panted heavily, utterly exhausted. The girls inside the prison slowly picked themselves off the floor and looked around. They reached out and noticed there was no longer any barrier holding them back. But no one dared make a move. No one dared to make a sound.

"No," the Crone said weakly. "No no no NO NO!" She continued to babble, getting louder and louder.

"Huh. Who would have thunk it?" Ba'el said, visibly impressed. "You might think you're a big shot, Cronie, but a genuine old world Royal Priestess of the Dead? Just bad luck I guess. There are people other than me who have been around longer than you have and know their ways around a spell or two. Or did you forget that too? Oh well. Tough break..." Her voice then turned to mock encouragement, "Try again next millennia?"

Weird clicking and gurgling sounds escaped the Crone as if she were choking on her own tongue behind her clenched teeth. Two losses in a row was too much for the ancient witch. Decades of planning and preparations up in smoke.

"Montée!" She roared.

Her eyes wide with rage boarding insanity locked onto her witches. They all nearly shat themselves in fear just looking at her. It was too much for some of them, yet the Crone didn't even seem to notice a couple witches here and there in the rear ranks turn and slink away. I was surprised it didn't cause a stampede of lemmings. It appeared that most of them were still more terrified by the Crone's wrath, and her hound, than any of us.

“Kill them! Every last one of them! Montéeeeeeeeeee!” She screamed again.

Of the witches who readied themselves, most did so reluctantly. This may be a time to talk with these witches. There was a very real miasma of terror that seemed to keep them here. It could be the cognitive dissonance between their lust for youth, power and pleasure that their master gave them in spades and their greenhorn fear of fighting. The girls and I prepared ourselves again. Someone was waiting for the other to make the first move. The tension hung in the air thick, other than the Crone's mad shrieking, no one else so much as peeped.

Rose, already in her aggressive stance and ready to attack, turned toward me and asked, “What's a Montey?”

I swallowed hard, my throat now completely dry, and whispered back, “Don't worry, the little girl and I already handled this once before. He's just-”

From below the Crone's VIP balcony, a giant crashed right through the cavern wall. The hulking brute of what was once a man smashed his way into the room. He encased completely in hundreds of black belts that magically augmented his strength. His blood had replaced by potions of strength. That thing had to be taller than four meters now. His muscles bulged, painfully, unnaturally, from his frame. When he roared, it wasn't a figment of my imagination that the cavern shook.

“MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON!”

Bits of rock rained down from the roof.

“-Even bigger than before!”

My jaw had dropped, and a profound feeling of terror seized me. His previous loss had only galvanized the already insane guardian of the witches to make himself even stronger than before. All that power and he only had to sacrifice some last shreds of his sanity along with now only being able to utter monosyllabic words. Rose did not share my dread. She had a look of surprise at first, but that slowly morphed into smile. The fire on her tail erupted and grew twice in size, and her eyes gleamed brightly, betraying her excitement.

Chapter 80

Heavy footfalls, comparable to thunder, echoed from a mountain of muscle as it lumbered further into the cavern. It had the form of a man—there was giant man-sized hole in the wall from whence he came—but he himself wasn't quite human. Behind layers of leather straps covering his head and face were the milky white eyes of an insane beast. I would have never presumed a man, a human man, could grow to such a size. He wasn't a monster but a mutant. A mutant borne from reckless application and experimentation. A twisted and grotesque product of the occult. The Crone must have meddled in powers beyond her own understanding because the only means to control this beast was to bind it.

His existence had to be an accident. His bones, muscles and sinew; all were so contorted, so bulbous and hideous. One of his arms was ruined; it was bound and appeared no different from a large plank of leather bound wood. It must be painful. Pain must accompany him with every breath, every step, every waking moment. Nightmares must stalk him for every wink he slept. It just had to be an accident... If it were by design. No. There isn't anyone capable of such cruelty.

But how could I answer what had happened to him in just the span of a single day? Montée had swelled and risen in height more than a full meter. The enchanted belts that clothed his body from head to toe strained to contain the muscly flesh beneath. A man of that size would have no trouble looking into a second story window. If he jumped, the tips of his fingers might just brush against the tall cavern ceiling. His arms were the size of trucks, and his chest was built like a semi. When his shipping container legs plodded forward, I could feel the earth vibrate beneath my feet.

Everyone in the cavern had come to a complete stop, not just the five of us but Ba'el and the witches as well. Even the children had stopped crying. Terror froze their waterworks. The only one who uttered a sound or moved a muscle was the Crone. She cackled, and her face glowed while celebrating the arrival of her attack hound.

Ba'el tore her eyes away and laid them onto the witch, who was laughing manically, “What in the hells have you done?”

There was a quiver in the demon's voice I didn't think was possible. She seemed unflappable, only ever playing coy when she was nervous, but I could feel her genuine horror. Not of fear, but of profound disgust at which she was witnessing before her eyes. She claimed to be over ten millennia old, if this was among the worst she has ever seen, then this affront against nature was something else. I don't think I was fully grasping just how unnatural and blasphemous. Even a demon from hell was visibly disgusted and disturbed by this

godless atrocity.

the Crone kept cackling as she turned and, with an insane look in her eye, answered her with glee, “I did nothing more than make someone's dream come true.”

Ba'el clenched her fists tightly around her weapon and grit her teeth. Her pupils dilated in anger, but even her furious expression didn't cause the witch to falter.

“He simply wasn't strong enough. You made that plenty obvious, Ba'el. Poor Montgomery here must be the strongest. That is all he wants. In order to be the protector he always wished to be, he must be stronger than anyone!”

Was she suggesting this was a choice that he made? That was a joke in poor taste. There wasn't any humor to be found in something like that. Yet she couldn't stop laughing; even though everyone else was silent. Even her minions were horrified. And so they should be. While they were getting drunk on power and inviolate youth, a fate just as bad, if not as ugly, could have been in store for any of them.

As Montée approached, the witches in his path were forced to scramble. He didn't even seem to notice all the girls scurry away underfoot. They had to clear a path; they'd be crushed underneath if they didn't. Stalactites and columns registered no more than the witches. They were carelessly pulverized into dust and gravel as they broke against his shoulder, head, or were kicked aside and stomped on. None of them so much as gave him pause. It was odd behavior for a so called protector. The only thing driving him forward seemed to be the command of his master.

His reach was ridiculous, and we were trapped at the far end of the cavern. He didn't need the help from all the witches to trap us here, so it was little comfort that most of the Crone's witches were fleeing as we all stood petrified before Montée. I wasn't sure if they would return, but it amounted to little comfort. They were not warriors. There's no way they'd put up a decent fight against party crashers like us. Now that the Crone had lost her marbles, and this giant was threatening to stomp on everything, I couldn't blame them for fleeing. They merely needed to leave everything to this two ton man, and he would do their job for them. With a few loyal lieutenants left to organize the remaining conscripts, and Ba'el giving her all just to keep the Crone occupied, the momentum of this fight had been suddenly flipped on its head.

I tore my gaze away from Montée and looked back at the orphans. Thirty girls sat there completely terrified and rightly so. Shoshanah was still there too, collapsed to her knees on the floor, her eyes wide open and observing the abomination. She shook her head ever so slightly, and her lips spoke something silently. It was horrifying enough to just look at him; I would never wish to see what might lie

inside, but the anubis had that power. Perhaps she just fell victim to her own curiosity. Large beads of sweat formed on her forehead, poured down across her face and pooled on the floor.

Rose and Chris held their ground to my left and right while Minte and Shoshanah remained in the rear nearest to the orphans. Chris was always boisterous and erred on the dramatic, but right now she was wearing a serious expression. Minte—who was normally the exact opposite to a fault—had a grimace on her face which replaced her usual blank stare. And as we stared, it stared back at us. The pile of muscle finally came to a stop about eighty odd meters away; but given its reach, that was hardly a safe distance. It stood there, slightly hunched over like a gorilla, breathing heavily with steam poured out from his nose and mouth. He remained otherwise motionless, no different from a statue.

the Crone screeched her command at the idle giant, “Montée, destroy them. Every last one of them!”

The giant came back to life and finally took in his surroundings for the first time. His soulless stare caused my skin to crawl. It made me feel slimy, but at the same time his pupil-less white eyes made it impossible to truly know where he was even looking, or what he was thinking.

If he still thought at all.

“Montée!” the Crone barked once again, “Your new sisters are in danger. These mean mean women and man want to take them away!”

That did it. The giant's head swiveled suddenly, his neck snapped and his gaze locked onto us. He looked over each of the girls, and his breathing became heavier. His chest rose and fell, and puffs of exhaust billowed from his nostrils which flared like an enraged bull's. From one girl to the next, his neck snapped and popped as his head swiveled to study each of them. When he finally laid his eyes lastly on Chris he appeared to reach his breaking point. The giant raised his one good arm into the air, slammed it against his chest in rage and stomped on the ground with his massive feet.

“FaaAAaaAT!” He roared. “SssMAaaaaaAaasSssH theeEEee FaaaAAaat!”

What?

With his grossly misshapen body, he threw himself forward. He charged shoulder first toward us without care. He was still intelligent enough to take orders, but it was clear his reasoning ability had been ruined beyond repair. So too was any notion of self preservation as he cared not for what lay in his path. He ignored and stomped every sharp rock into dust and body-checked every pillar or pile of debris in his way. I almost didn't make it out of his path in time; Rose had to grab

me by the arm and pull me along with her when she jumped out of the way. A crater was left where we stood before, and stony shrapnel was sent in every direction. A plume of dust erupted from ground which fractured and shook.

Montée was slow to take in his new surroundings, so Chris took the opportunity to leap into the air behind him. She didn't even shout out some lame catch phrase or the title of some technique. Her whole body spun around in mid-air, steered by her tail and held aloft by her wings, and her right talon slammed into the side of the giant's head. The crack given off by the impact was no different than a sledgehammer against concrete. His head abruptly knocked a good thirty degrees, but his grotesque face didn't even register a grimace of pain.

Chris could feel there was something wrong right away, but she was suspended in the air and didn't have a chance to get away. Montée was slow to understand, but now he acted as though he were aware again. He spun around on the spot with alarming speed, and his plank-like arm caught Chris on the side. It didn't smash her when it hit, but it did catch her. When the giant reached the apex of his spin and swing, Chris flung off across the room. Her wings couldn't catch the air nor provide enough drag in time, thus she was still at full speed when she slammed into the wall.

The wyvern was made of sterner stuff, but even she was shaken-up for a few seconds. Her skin and scales were scuffed, yet she was still in one piece. She pried herself free from the wall and collapsed onto the ground below. With a few shakes of her head, gray dust billowed from her hair. Her eyes refocused on the giant who had fully turned around and was lining himself up for another charge toward her. The beast's eyes were enraged, and veins bulged noticeably across his body where they could be seen between the strips of leather that cocooned him.

“UuuUuug!” He stammered and moaned aloud. “-IeeEeee... UuuglyyyYYYyy! FaaAAaaat. SssSssmAAaAaaSsssH!”

A flip had been switched inside his head and now he was an unstoppable brute. He thumped his chest with his one good arm like a gorilla and stomped his feet on the ground which caused it to quake and buckle. It was a frightening change from one day ago. I had thought he was a terrifying presence before he was thrown haphazardly across the room, but now he absorbed a blow from Chris's powerful legs as though it was no more than a playful slap to the face.

I was afraid for Chris who didn't seem quite ready for round two, but Minte quickly jumped into the fray. Over and above, or around quickly from the side, it didn't matter; she appeared in front of Montée

and blocked his path. There was no way he was dumb enough to ignore the mantis and her razor sharp blades. Even if the giant was strong enough to shatter stone with ease, he would have to be concerned with the girl who could pierce and cut to ribbons that same stone. Her arm blades snikted into place, and she lowered into an aggressive stance. Minte's face was once again stoic and unflappable, ready to take on the man more than ten times her own size.

Montée stopped. He slowly pulled his eyes away from Chris, still at the far end of the cavern. His eyes studied the mantis from head to toe for a brief moment. Minte's feet dragged across the floor as she readied herself to strike or dodge as she saw fit when the giant attacked... Montée did not move. He looked away from her dismissively, and his shoulders shrugged while letting out an apathetic grunt. His rage was momentarily absent during his callous assessment of the threat before him... and how Minte compared to his other deeply held beliefs.

Minte's stoney face cracked. Her straight face twisted slightly into a surprised frown, and her eyes shot open wide and went blank. She went completely still, shocked into stillness. The giant ignored her and lumbered past her. Neither seemed willing, nor cared, to deal with the other.

“Hang in there, Minte,” I said quietly to myself.

It was too stupid for me to spell it out, but I had a deep pang of sympathy for the poor girl. But it was Chris who was in mortal danger right now.

I picked myself off the ground and stood back up beside the oddly quiet Rose. It didn't take me long to figure out why. She was very nearly salivating, and her eyes were sparkling, along with her wide toothy grin full of fangs that glinted under what remained of the red moonlight.

“Hey, Laven,” She said, barely able to contain her excitement.

I watched as her face slowly turned toward me. Her excitement in profile was something, but when she looked right at me with that almost psychotic expression of hers. It was a bit too much. Rose's eyes were dilated, her muscles were surging with adrenaline and her tail was whipping back and forth behind her. Her tail spewed embers like a freshly lit sparkler while her claws restlessly clenched and relaxed on their own, and her talons scraped against the stone floor. If I wasn't aware of why, or I thought it was directed at me, I might have very well fainted at the terrifying sight.

“It's okay to let loose, right?”

I tore my eyes away for a moment toward Montée as he slowly stomped across the cavern toward Chris. I turned my eyes to the

sound of an explosion caused by Ba'el and the Crone who resumed their duel. Chris was on her feet again, but she was still stunned and a bit wobbly on her legs. Lastly, I looked over to the other witches scrambling to carry their wounded and vulnerable out of the cavern. They looked on at the giant of a man rampaging freely with the same terror that I did. He was unpredictable with tunnel vision. The only orders he took were the Crone's, and she was busy exchanging potential death blows with the little demon.

With all the conviction I could muster, I turned back toward Rose, “Yeah. Buy me some time.”

She slowly closed her eyes, relaxed her face and tightened her lips into a sly grin.

“Afraid I can't buy you much time-”

Rose opened her eyes and flashed me a playful grin.

“-it won’t take me that long to deal with 'em.”

“Heh,” I chuckled. “Right. You take care of that. I'm going to get these kids out of here.”

Rose nodded and stepped forward. She reached for the longsword strapped to her back and pulled it free from its scabbard. The leather which had sealed it away clattered while the iron sung as it vibrated freely in the cold air.

She retorted back to me as she walked away, “Don't take too long. I don't wanna be left waiting for you later.”

Rose approached Montée from behind. Letting the tip of the sword clang ever so gently against the ground as she did. The giant wasn't completely deaf and sensed the approach, so he lifted his narrow vision from Chris and turned his head toward Rose the best he could. All the muscles that made up his neck were an ugly bulbous knot of sinew, but he eventually managed. When Rose got his attention, she flourished her sword deftly, twirling it around her wrist and showing it off to the giant.

“That's right,” Rose taunted. “Look at the pretty shiny.”

When she noticed she had yet to get his full attention, she held her sword out then whipped her burning tail into an angle behind it. The light from her tail refracted off the silvery mirror edge of the blade and went right into the hulking brute's one eye. He winked involuntarily a few times, the constant ray of firelight caused him some pain and discomfort. It was only a nuisance, but he wasn't a being that had self-restraint, so in his rage, he let out a mighty roar. Montée abandoned his lumbering toward Chris and turned around to face Rose.

“That's it. Come on, stupid,” Rose continued to taunt while limbering her knees with some quick boxing footwork, hopping up and down.

I think that would get Montée's attention for a completely

different reason.

True to his nature, the giant threw his head back and gave one last earth rumbling roar before throwing himself into a barreling charge toward the salamander. Rose didn't even budge; she kept walking slowly, calmly, toward the charging elephant of a man. He raised his black leather wrapped plank and brought it down like an axe. Rose waited till the last moment to turn away and jump back just enough so that it missed her by less than a ruler's length. Even the explosion of dirt and debris didn't faze her. The path the arm took was just too predictable so far as Rose was concerned. She got cocky and didn't pay the price.

The giant pulled his club arm back so that he could swipe at Rose's head with his meat hook of a right hand. All she had to do was duck low, and the grubby hand only just brushed past some loose threads of her ponytail. Montée followed up with raising a leg up high and stamping down where his target was crouching. He hit nothing but ground. Rose had been coiled like a spring, so she easily somersaulted backward. Undaunted, the giant followed up by raising his fist high up and punched down with all his might. He thought he might catch her in mid-flip, but Rose was much faster. Pushing off the ground a second time, with the help of her tail to balance, she dodged the earth shattering blow.

Now the giant's overconfidence received punishment. With his fist dug into the ground, Rose was free to do as she wished. She quickly recovered from her second back flip and dug her rear talon into the dirt. Rose's sword twirled and danced as an extension of her own wrist. Her claw wrapped around the mid point of her sword and raised it above her shoulder like a stake. With a battle cry of her own, she stabbed it down into the back of the giant's clenched hand. A puncture sound reverberated from their fight, the tip of her sword drove a good nine centimeters through the snarled muscle and bone of his hand.

Montée shrieked, the high pitch of his voice was very much unlike his previous roaring; he sounded no different from a beaten dog. The giant pulled his stabbed hand back and stumbled backward. Without another hand to nurse it, he could only prop it up on his plank arm and retreat both into his chest. A black ichor flowed from his hand and dripped onto the floor. Rose did not pursue. The tip of her blade was coated in black, but it splattered against the floor when she quickly flourished the sword once. She relaxed, slung the sword behind her head and rubbed her nose with the back of her free hand. I heard her chuckle; and even while behind her, I could make out the profile of her face and one corner of her lips curling into a grin.

The giant didn't stay timid for long, when the surprise of the blood and pain subsided, it was replaced with rage. Montée beat his

chest with his wounded hand and stomped his feet more savagely than before.

"Come on!" Rose shouted in response, beckoning him with a welcoming outstretched claw.

She was keeping him busy. It was a ray of sunshine during an otherwise dark moment. Wasting it would be a failure on my part, so I stopped staring like a slack-jawed yokel and started running back toward the orphans. They had taken the time when the giant was being distracted to retreat further into the cavern, which was a good idea. However, I had to sprint further across what had quickly become a no man's land. Pockmarks were carved out of the stone from stray magics, and the earth shook with the clash of those battling all around me. A near miss broke the ground next to me and threw me off my balance. I had no choice but to take a dive out of the open and roll to safety behind some rocks. No sooner then when I thought I'd be safe, Ba'el and the Crone slammed into the opposite side of the boulder.

I was surprised that the boulder did not shatter into pieces. Luckily, it held together, but behind me the demon and witch were locked in a grapple. Ba'el was being crushed further into the rock by a shimmer of some giant spectral red hand. It grew out from the tip of the Crone's staff and held the demon in place. She was putting everything she had into the spell in an effort to flatten Ba'el like a bug. The little demon could only push back with shaft of her scythe.

"Soft... Too soft!" I heard the Crone shriek and cackle. "If you were aiming to kill me back there, you were too soft! But that's not it, is it? You pulled back because you can't do it. You know what would happen if you went through with it... So why are you still resisting?"

"Because... a rowdy little child needs a serious spanking on top... of the smack they got," Ba'el growled while struggling to push the Crone back.

the Crone cackled and snapped back, "A trollop such as you doesn't have a leg to stand when trying to take the high road."

"You know what they say about glass houses. Let those who haven't sunk to bestiality cast the first stone."

the Crone's eyebrows furrowed, and her demented smile was slapped right off her face by Ba'el's verbal jab. Her face also flushed red.

The demon wore a straight face while she said very dryly, "I was just talking about your own personal gimp, but hey, whatever floats your boat."

They both looked over at Montée throwing his weight around while the nimble and adept Rose deftly dodged each fist, foot and body-slam he threw at her. Each time he screamed and roared just like some wild beast, mindless and without a trace of humanity.

“Well... Let me just cast away then,” Ba'el quipped.

With a grunt and battle-cry of her own, she mustered her strength and pushed back against the Crone's red spectral hand. The flustered witch was caught off guard, and it was too late to refocus her energies in time. Ba'el shoved back with an explosion of magic from her scythe that hit the witch with shock-wave and sent her flying. The only thing she left behind was a wailing cry as she shot off like a bullet.

“...Even I never stooped so low before...” Ba'el muttered under her breath while peeling her back off the boulder and then dashing off to give pursuit.

With the two of them rampaging back across the cavern, I took the opportunity to dive back out of cover and keep sprinting. That rock probably wouldn't survive another impact like the one before, so I had not other choice. I had to brave the cross-fire, the debris, shrapnel and flying pieces of old mine equipment that had been left to rot among the witch coven's new furniture. I cleared the distance in record time and slid behind the next group of boulders for cover.

My breathing was heavy. I was covered in dust and splotches of black ash, but the sound of fighting was now a little more distant. When I raised my head I saw just what I had hoped, the dozens of girls all huddled together. Some held their hands over the ears and eyes, crying while others tried to comfort them, but they were otherwise unharmed. A couple noticed I had arrived, and it didn't take long until they all knew. Though I wasn't exactly met with smiles and open arms. That wasn't unexpected.

Their faces and eyes were all red, tears stained their cheeks and the billowing clouds of ash and dust had caked on their clothes, skin and hair. I was glad I didn't see any shades of red, so none of them seemed to have been harmed physically. There was no way in hell they hadn't been already been harmed mentally though. A few too many, more than one, had thousand yard stares as they cowered. Some had probably already lost friends who had been among the ten who had already been carried away. Some may have even volunteered willingly. The rest were quietly in despair or silently hoping someone would save them. Many had their hands clasped in prayer and those who had yet to acknowledge me at all were nodding their heads and reciting old prayers from rote.

The moon may be red, and the witches run freely in spite of their lord, but I was still here. Seeing their faces hardened my resolve.

Sitting up against a rock on the other side, all alone, was Shoshanah. She was the only smile in the whole house when she noticed I had arrived. It actually seemed everyone had scooted themselves as far away as possible from the anubis. It was a rather cold shoulder to the one who probably used up the last of her strength

to shield them as they ran here. That also wasn't unexpected. Every girl here had been raised their entire lives to believe monsters were villains that would eat them if they didn't pay attention to their guardians... I guess that sort of already happened. It was still going to be a challenge because I certainly wasn't able to rescue them all by myself... I guess I wasn't much better after tricking them all by infiltrating the orphanage when I was actually a grown man.

Keeping my head low, I made my way around the group of girls toward Susan and squat down next to her.

"My spirits are lifted to see that you are unharmed, Laven," She said with a weak smile.

"We don't have much time. We're gonna get this started right away."

She looked shocked for a moment. My tone was a little forceful, maybe, but that was just the nature of the beast we were tackling right now. For some that was a little more literal. I had neither the time nor reason to apologize though. I saw that I didn't need to because she gave a tired yet even brighter smile than before in return.

"I need to talk with Chris. Right away," I said.

A thump and crunch of stone rose above the sound of battle in the distance.

"Speak her name, and she shall appear!"

Chris had appeared and perched herself atop the boulder behind the huddled children. It scared them, but they were not about to run. There was nowhere for them to run.

"Christophaclies, reporting for duty!" She shouted and saluted with her wing.

She remained perched on the rock, her back to the chaos, with her wings were spread out like an umbrella over the children. I guess she wouldn't need to worry about any direct hits from long range with that thick hide of hers as she played the role of human shield. It was sad to see they were even more terrified of her than they were of Susan sitting opposite of them all this time. What was even worse was that it didn't seem to register in Chris's head that she was frightening them at all.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I still had to ask, "Then what about Minte-"

When I turned my head, she was already squatting down right next to me, staring right into my eyes the moment I turned my head. The shock nearly have me a heart attack. I don't know how, but the children were all shocked at the same moment I was. As if she hadn't existed behind me until I turned around. Surely out of thirty pairs of eyes a few would have noticed the mantis emerge from the shadows... No. That's not important right now.

“-alright, we're all here then.”

I stood up and carefully looked over to the other side of the cavern where I could still see Rose dancing around Montée. The giant could not connect a blow, but neither did he give up. While they fought, somewhere off in the darkness further down the cavern, I could hear the thundering blows and magics being tossed about by Ba'el and the Crone. The New Moon Sabbath's goons were caught in the middle. Lucky for us, most of them were more concerned about their own safety. A few were exemplary enough to get their unconscious and wounded out of harm's way, but it appeared the sisterhood was not as strong as it appeared superficially.

“I don't know how long those two can keep fighting, or for how long those witches might leave us alone, so we're gonna get these girls out of here. Now.”

The three of them nodded in unanimous agreement. However, it was Shoshanah, the realist, who had to speak up first and ask the million dollar question.

“How exactly do you propose we extradite so many human children expediently?”

“When we all got here, we were teleported in. I don't know if there's even a normal way in or out. I certainly didn't notice one beneath us. That's why we're gonna use the one we do know.”

I pointed up toward the ceiling.

“We're going to fly them out.”

The girls had been silently paying attention in the background, but even they couldn't stay quiet when I suggested something so absurd and unobtainable by any ordinary human. Terror was the prevailing feeling, and I didn't blame any of them. I didn't see any other option though.

Shoshanah was quick to try knocking the wind out of that sail's idea, “While we may have infiltrated via the opening near the mountain's summit, it may be too-”

“Nonsense!” Chris bellowed, scaring the children even more. “I could easily fly through it.”

“The opening is smaller than your wingspan, you cretin!” the anubis shouted back.

“Heh,” Chris chuckled. “I don't remember the last time someone telling me something couldn't be done stopped me.”

Shoshanah raised an eyebrow “Pray tell, how did those times work out?”

Silence.

Ignoring the awkward silence, Chris's face did not change while she repeated herself, “The point is I tried, and everything worked out in the end.”

Susan's face fractured like a mirror hit with a hammer. Chris was just too much for her to handle right now. Her expression contorted painfully, and she wanted so very badly to say something, anything, but she had the better sense not to... Maybe she was just completely at a loss for words altogether. Left holding her bags while the conversation train had already left the station.

I asked her straight up just to make sure, “Chris. You can get these kids out of here?”

She did her best to raise one of her forearm claws in the shape of a thumbs up.

“Absolutely!”

I'd have to go with that for now. The alternative, doing nothing, was infinitely worse right now. Now I just needed one more thing to put in place.

“Minte.”

“Yes?” She replied, quieter than a feather falling.

“Can you jump high enough to get through?”

Her antenna stood up straight and pointed at the opening, then the light inside her compound eyes and finally she lifted her head up slowly to look at it. Minte's wings buzzed and shifted underneath her mantid abdomen for a second while she thought. When she looked back down, she nodded.

“Alright. Here's the deal. Chris takes as many of the girls as she can and flies them to a safe distance. In the meantime, Minte will stay behind and guard the girls. When Chris returns, Minte will take whoever she can carry. Then it will be Chris's turn to hold down the fort. We'll keep rotating until everyone is out. Simple enough?”

Chris and Minte nodded. Shoshanah was the only one who seemed to have reservations about agreeing right away.

“You forgot to mention what role I shall play.”

“You're heading out first,” I said plainly.

Her inquisitive face melted once again into surprise. It didn't take long for it to become indignant.

“Laven-”

“No. Don't try and hide it,” I barked and interrupted her. “You're all tapped out. I can tell.”

Her stern expression softened.

“Besides,” I added. “Someone has to watch over the kids at the drop-off zone.”

“Surely, that should be you for your own pro-”

“Susan. Please.”

I pleaded with her, but at the same time my voice was still stern. Her chest was still heaving, and her voice was a little dry, so her throat was completely parched. I wouldn't be surprised if I caught her

panting any second now. Breaking that ritual had taken everything out of her. All of her magics had been expended with just a single action, and they weren't going to return to her until the break of dawn. She was just as sturdy as any other monster, but right now she was vulnerable. I could not let her stay here in this cave where the Crone and Montée were rampaging. I couldn't let her put herself at risk for me like that. Because she- for me... that she...

"Besides, you can get two or three of these kids out of here for the price of myself. They don't weigh nearly as much as I do. These girls here are the ones who need to be protected right now. The ones to do that are us... That includes me."

Shoshanah didn't respond. She looked down at the ground, a flush of red spread across her cheeks. I stood up and walked over the to the children, the last people I had to get on board for this plan. I knelt down on one knee in front of them and wore the best smile I could. Anything to try and alleviate their fears. The adults had to look calm and composed.

"This isn't the way I would have like to do it, and I'm a bit late, but let me introduce myself. My name isn't Lola, and I'm not your new sister. I'm not even your new brother. I made a deal with your headmaster and together we fooled everyone else back at the abbey. My name is Laven."

I had the attention from all thirty of them now. I made sure to speech a little louder so that the sounds of the battle still raging in the distance didn't cut me off.

"I'm a... mercenary," I said, tentatively, unsure if it was the appropriate word to use. "I was hired to protect you. And if I couldn't do that, rescue you."

That was a lie, but I didn't care. It was the truth now, so far as I was concerned.

"I disguised myself hoping I'd catch these witches in the act or get dragged along with you and break us out... It worked. Now is only chance to get you out of here. I know you're scared. I don't blame any of you for that. But right now, I need you all to do two things. I need you to trust me."

I knelt there and studied each of their faces. I still had their attention, but most of their faces told me they were still suspicious of me.

One little girl finally spoke up, "What's the other thing?"

"Hold on tight- Chris!"

"Yes, sir, master, sir!" The wyvern said, standing to attention.

She leaped off the rocked she was perched on and came crashing down to ground level beside me. I stood back up; the girls

were startled, shaken and tried to distance themselves. It was now time for some harsh words.

"You can either go with us, or you can stay here. The choice is that simple... Right. Chris, there's got to be a safe spot not far off, right?"

"Hmm," Chris hummed while closing her eyes tight. "There's a clearing a bit down the slope. Then there's a place by the river at the foot of the mountain."

That might do.

"Shallow water? Slow current?"

"Bend in the river. Steep sides, but flat in some places. Shallow enough."

That will do.

There wasn't so much as a peep or word of protest, so I turned around to Shoshanah.

"You're first," I said.

The anubis reluctantly got up and walked over to Chris. She wasn't sure what to do at first, so Chris wriggled her long tail a bit. Shoshanah knelt down on her knees, slowly wrapped her paws around the base of the tail and then finally hugged it snugly underneath her arm.

"I wish for you all to know that I am putting myself on the record for believing this idea is not without- YIPE!"

She let out a surprise yelp when one of the scared children has latched herself onto her bushy tail. No doubt it had to hurt since the kid was pulling on it while she hugged it as tightly against herself that she could. Shoshanah's eyes shot open wide, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

"Up you go," I heard Minte say.

The mantis had already grabbed hold of and lifted one of the other girls and dropped her against Susan's back. The terrified girl didn't squirm or try to get away, but her tiny hands grabbed hold of the ears on top of the priestess head as though they were handlebars. Now Shoshanah was really crying and whining louder than before as her head was pulled backward almost as far as it could go.

"Get them all to the clearing, after we got them all out of here, get them down to the river. We'll rendezvous there."

One girl grabbed hold of Chris tail further down and wrapped her body around it while a fourth grabbed onto the wyvern's horns when she lowered her head down. That was as many as we could comfortably fit, so Chris didn't waste any more time.

Chris kicked off the ground with her powerful legs and got some serious air with her jump. She caught the wind underneath her massive wings and started flapping them as hard as she could. There

wouldn't be much room for error, and she needed to pick up a lot of speed. The wyvern circled round and round the room and got higher and higher, closer and closer, to the ceiling until she flew close underneath it.

Witches and stray spells hounded her the whole way, I could hear the terrified shrieks of the girls desperately clinging onto her and Susan's pained yelps. With all the speed she built up, she turned her direction upward very suddenly. Chris tucked her wings in and shot straight up and cleared the hole in the ceiling without much room to spare. The tip of her tail scrapped and knocked some stone loose on the rim, but she made it. She'd open her wings, stop her fall and pick up speed, then she'd have clear skies to the drop-off point.

Four down... Too many to go.

"She's gonna hold that against me isn't she?"

"Yes. She will," Minte replied, who was still standing next to me.

Maybe next time she'll think twice about putting me in a dress. I'll take whatever punishment she can dish out later. Right now, there was still a lot of work to do.

Chapter 81

It had taken less than a half hour, but the cavern had officially turned into a war zone. It had all the hallmarks of one, and they kept accumulating. Destruction, scaring, wounded and unconscious bodies strewn about, displaced people and an ideological struggle of greed, redemption and madness. We were slowly losing the battle, but we were on our way to winning the war. Victory now relied on rescuing the children, and we were well on our way to accomplishing that.

Shoshanah was safe, and Chris and Minte were making progress evacuating the children. The battle continued to rage on between the Crone and Ba'el whose titanic clash of ancient magics continued to sunder the cavern. A duel between the mountain of muscle, Montée, and Rose; who, despite not even coming up to his waist, was keeping the beast at bay. She even managed to harm him. He looked nigh invulnerable earlier, but even he can bleed. I don't know how she managed it, but every time I looked over, there was some new cut on the giant's body.

But things were about to heat up.

The first group was away, but that got the attention of the witches. The battle which was raging throughout the cavern finally returned to our end. A loud whizz and bang zipped over my head and exploded against the walls behind me. Orphans all around me screamed and took cover. I too went to ground no sooner than the tops of the boulders all around me got shaved off by beams of light. Even Minte was forced to dive toward the ground; tackling and shielding two girls too shell-shocked to react fast enough on their own. The barrage didn't last too long, and when I peered over the edge I saw Ba'el and the Crone had once again brought their battle to this side of the cavern.

The old witch ranted and raved, “I don't remember telling any of you pretties you're allowed to leave. It's dangerous out there. Something bad might happen to you!”

Ba'el was standing a fair distance away but still between the witch and the rest of us. Smoke was rising off of her from scorch marks sustained from taking several direct hits in that last barrage.

“It's a cruel world out there. You know that, don't you Ba'el?”

“Shut... up...” Ba'el said menacingly, her tiny chest heaving in pain.

“So you do? I thought you did. What surprises is me is why you care. How odd.”

The demon clicked her tongue in disgust.

“Odd thing for a demon to do. Get in the way like that when it doesn't help you at all... I wonder why. Could it be-”

Ba'el's patience ran out, and she screamed over the witch and charged headlong back into the fray. Her colossal blows and the witch's potent magics clashed again, and their rampage continued. The cavern itself seemed barely able to contain them both, and it was showing as slabs of rock became craters, and whole sections peeled off the walls from various impacts.

Rose's battle with the giant continued in the distance. His swings had become more wild, but Rose continued to twirl, dance and sidestep every potential deathblow. And it would only take one hit from such huge limbs moving that fast. I watched as she dodged one, slid past another and passed through the legs of the beast. As she ran through, Rose's blade slashed against Montée's hamstring. A spray of black blood and his screams shook the cavern as he went crashing down to one knee. His flailing prevented the salamander from comboing it into a more serious blow. That wasn't enough to bring him down though. It was as if he had more than one hamstring to spare. He quickly stood back up and continued to chase the agile Rose around the battleground.

I had my own concerns to deal with now. The Crone's attack had panicked the girls, and many of them had been forced to take new cover which had caused them to spread out further than before. After witnessing the orphans making an escape, several of the witch lieutenants were converging on our location too. It was Minte's turn to spring into action as she leaped into the fight. She moved with blinding speed and got into striking range before most of them even sensed her. A few blows with her swift, powerful legs were more than enough. She was, however, outnumbered. The counterattack pushed her back, but she was able to deflect, dodge, outrun, and even cut down some spells tossed at her. I even watched her charge headlong into a shining ray shot at her. Minte held her arm blades in front of her as she approached, splitting the beam in half like an icebreaker until she rising axe kicked the witch in the chin. She excelled at being a distraction.

There was no way she could keep it up forever though. We were ahead right now, but only because we were sprinting while our opponent was jogging. I had no way of knowing if this was a hundred meter race or a marathon, but we'd tire ourselves and be overwhelmed if we didn't reach the finish line soon. We'd collapse on the track, and the witches would catch us. Even now, Minte was sweating and looked as though she were quickly becoming exhausted.

In the meantime, I ran to and fro safe guarding and gathering the girls. After about two minutes Chris returned through the opening and crashed down on a group of witches and started her tour of duty on the front line. Minte saw this and quickly grabbed hold of two children. Her wings spread out behind her and, with her powerful legs,

kicked off the ground. The children screamed like banshees since they were not prepared, nor even saw the assassin, before she grabbed them. Minte leaped up high and pushed off one wall then bounded to a pillar. She flew from wall to wall, ricocheting, climbing higher and higher, until she shot out through the opening.

Chris's rampage threw the witches for a loop. Her fiery breath and impervious skin allowed her to bulldoze through their defensive lines and throw their ranks into chaos as she rampaged and shouted her catch phrases and threats of judgment. Most of the time it sounded like inarticulate yelling, but that might just be because there was so much going on at once.

Minte returned in no time flat, and Chris gathered up another eager five kids and took to the skies through the opening when she gained enough speed. Minte flash stepped and kept several witches in check when they tried to shoot her out of the sky while I shepherded what girls I could find to safety. The number of orphans left in the cavern steadily declined, and we appeared to be on schedule. Minte and Chris traded places again and again. It was then after five minutes that I finally encountered a pair of familiar faces I had missed.

Two girls had made their way too far away from the rest of the others. I cursed under my breath and leaped on and across the stones and debris toward them.

“What the hell are you two doing?”

The girl with the brown hair and over abundance of freckles on her face turned toward me started and panicking. It was Feena, and the younger girl with the black hair and slanted hostile face, even under all this duress, was Gloria.

"Lo- Laven!” Feena yelled, her eyes wet with tears and her throat hoarse from crying. “We can't-”

Another loud crash shook the whole cavern and cut her off. They both covered their ears at the ear piercing explosion and sound of stone being pulverized. With her hands on each side of her head, she tried to scream again.

“We can't find-”

A second explosion cut her off again, and both girls winced in fear. I had to jump down to where they were to get out of harms way. I didn't know if those explosions would land nearby or on top of us anytime soon.

“You're on of the last ones left!” I shouted at them both. “You can't be all the way over here! It isn't safe!”

“Laven! Please-” Gloria tried to say, but a third explosion closer than the first two silenced her quickly.

“Minte!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Get these two out of here, now!”

I called for her, and she arrived. She wrapped her arms around each of the waists and lifted them off the ground. They protested and kicked, but they couldn't break the mantis' grip. Minte quickly jumped to safety as her wings buzzed behind her. We were almost done now. Only a few more were missing. I desperately dashed across the cavern to find them and wave Chris in to pick them up and get them out. After just another two minutes I believed we had them all. That was until I heard a faint sobbing.

Hidden underneath some piled-up boulders was one more girl. She was huddled inside the crevices and hoping the world would forget she was there. The girl had short boy-cut red hair and was alarmingly thin. That's probably why a girl of her size was able to squeeze into such a small space. It wasn't a safe space to be. One errant tremor could dislodge the pile and trap her, or worse, crush her.

I ran up and held out my hand for the girl, shouting at the top of my lungs, “Come out, get out of there!”

Screaming at the girl was a bad idea; it caused her to panic. I had no choice. She would not have heard me otherwise. The girl shook her head and tried to back away further into the crevice. My patience was low, as was the time we had left. I violently stuck my hand into the space and grabbed hold of the girl's wrist. She wailed and screamed in protest, but I didn't relent. The girl was only ten years old or so, she had no strength to oppose me, but that didn't stop her from trying to grab hold of the grooves inside to stop me from pulling her out. For her own good I had to yank her out of there. I didn't let go even when she got desperate and bit me on my thumb. I just swore and pulled even harder until I dragged her out.

The girl refused to let go of my thumb. I was so full of adrenaline that I almost hit her, but instead I pitched her nose shut with my other hand and did my best to cover up her mouth. She had to breath eventually, and when she coughed after nearly suffocating I pulled my bleeding thumb free from her teeth. I didn't feel the pain yet, but I still had to grab the girl and pull her along as she flailed and tried to crawl back into her hiding space like a terrified squirrel. She was hysterical, and I had to fold her arm to her back to keep her under control and push her back to where it was actually safer. It was all for her own good. She was out of her mind with fear.

A forth explosion rocked the area, and this time I couldn't not look. There was a giant plume of dust from where the last impact had come. Montée's fist embedded into the wall where the witches once sat on the balcony having their dinner. Through the dust I could spot a torchlight running along and away from the giant. That had to be Rose. She had good reason to run. Montée was giving chase and running his fist along the balcony like a petulant child using his arm to knock all the

objects off a shelf. His legs were long enough to catch up easily enough, but when he raised his club arm back up to bring it down in front of or behind Rose, she leaped off at the last moment to safety.

The salamander dropped back down to the arena floor and rolled forward to break her fall. She quickly rolled back up to her feet and slid to a stop on her talons, scraping against the floor, as she turned around to face Montée. There was a trail of destruction they left behind. Dozens of wooden tables and chairs splintered beyond repair. Many more plates shattered, and their food thrown in every direction. There were even some sharp pieces of cutlery sticking out of Montée's arm, but he didn't seem to care.

Rose stood her ground as the giant turned to face her and refused to budge even when his lumbering gait became a jogging stomp toward her. I looked behind her and saw the pillar she was in front of and noticed that it actually didn't even reach the ceiling. If Montée hit it that hard, it would crumble with ease. She must know that. Of course he didn't.

Montée lowered his shoulder and ran right into the pillar. Rose quickly dashed toward and through the giant's legs at the last moment. Just as I, and Rose, suspected, the pillar broke with ease. It didn't get pushed over. It broke at the halfway point under Montée's strength, but the top half remained motionless in the air for a split second until gravity pulled it down. It fell the other way, on top of Montée. A few tons of stone crashed down and slammed into his head. He roared and screamed in pain, but all it did was club him over the noggin. It didn't crush him. Still, the giant was knocked down to his knees and with his one arm he threw the pillar of stone off of him.

The destruction caused a huge cloud of dust so thick that I lost track of Rose, usually easily followed by tail fire. The brute still tried to peer her out, but he failed until it was too late. Rose emerged from the dust cloud at a dash with her sword next to her hip. She ran up to the giant on his left side, the side with his useless plank arm. Her tail erupted, and the flame grew to twice its height and intensity. A trail of embers streamed behind her like a low light exposure image, and her sword began to glow white hot. Wisps of flame danced off the blade while she leaped up and toward Montée. Rose let out a roar as she spun in mid flight; the streak of flame from her tail and blade made a beautiful shining circle of light.

Not even the giant wouldn't notice an attack like that. He pulled his head back and raised his plank arm to defend himself. But it seemed a fatal blow to the giant's head was not actually Rose's goal at all. She did not overextend like the giant had hoped. The apex for her spinning jump collided perfectly against his leather casket arm. Rose's fiery blade struck true and at a weak point. The sword acted like a

plasma cutter, the sound of a welding torch screeched as it collided with Montée's arm. Sparks flew, and the arm was quickly lopped off from the midpoint of the bicep. The giant roared in pain and threw himself backward. His clumsy steps caused him to trip over the very same pillar he had thrown off himself just a moment ago, and his massive writhing bulk was too much for his knees which gave out. His back crashed against the ground behind him with an earth-shattering slam.

Another massive plume of dust shot up into the air, and its cloud billowed across the cavern and washed over myself and the girl I was strong-arming. We both coughed in fits, but at least coughing wasn't thrashing about and trying to claw at me. Now she had to use her other hand to cover her mouth, just as I was. When the dust cleared, I saw Rose standing, but she didn't relax. Her eyes were fixed on the body of Montée laying on the ground. She then watched as he slowly got back onto his feet.

He was missing an entire arm, but even that wasn't enough to stop him. Tears of black ichor seeped from his eyes, but his rage had yet to be quelled. His breathing sped up, and his shoulders began to heave up and down. Grotesquely. I felt a terrible sense of dread as I watched. Even Rose's battle frenzied smile wiped off her face. The giant started letting out short furious cries as the stump that was now his left arm began to bulge and squirm. Something shot free of his stump. It came into being with the sound of ripping flesh, and it wasn't the last. Four more terrible rips of flesh echoed, and dangling from his stump were five long wriggling tendrils of green vine-like appendages. They whipped and cracked at random, sounding no different from leather whips. Each seemed to be covered in a slimy mucus-like texture.

The girl in my arms screamed at the sight. I let go of her arm so that I could cover her eyes with one hand and cover her mouth with the other. Rose took a couple steps back as well, her eyes wide open with surprise and disgust. Even the witches still battling stopped what they were doing to look on in disbelief. Minte's calm face faintly twisted into horror and disgust. There was only one individual who was unfazed. Her cackle resounded off the acoustics of the cavern walls.

Ba'el's enraged voice rose above the cackles, “Crone!”

I turned my head to see the two of them off in the distance, standing far apart and between exchanging blows. The demon's eyes were knit and furrowed with rage. Her voice was heavy with accusation and outrage. The Crone continued to cackle madly.

“So you found my secret favorite toy, did you?” She couldn't stifle her cackling, and she laughed through her nose till she calmed enough to continue. “But I don't remember giving you permission!

Montée! Stop playing around! Crush her! Stomp them all into dust!”

I felt my stomach churn. The slimy sound made my queasy, but as the giant stepped over the fallen pillar, the sound of those tentacles snapping like loose power lines caused my arm to break out into goosebumps. This was no accident; the Crone had said it with her own words. This was a toy. A plaything for her own amusement. This mountain of a man was like this by design. I could no longer pretend that he wasn't. The cruelty involved in such a thing, the blatant disrespect for humanity, was too much for me to handle. It shook my right down to my soul.

While I looked on in horror, Rose stood her ground and prepared to keep fighting like she promised. But the range of those green appendages was longer than it appeared to be. They stretched out like rubber and shot toward Rose like spears. She had to scramble to guard against the first one which she dodged and cut down, but it simply grew back instantly, and violently, from where it was cut only a few seconds later. It appeared to cause the giant little discomfort.

Montée bundled them together into a club, and they moved together and impossible angles and ridiculous speeds. They slammed into the ground as a mallet and obliterated the ground Rose had been standing on just a moment earlier. She could no longer get any closer. All Rose could do was run and dodge. The tentacles would unfurl and shoot out after her as she fled. They would snake across the air unbound by gravity and rain down as spear thrusts. Each was fast enough to stick into the stone when they missed. Every time Rose cut one down, it would fall to the earth and wriggle helplessly before drying out, disintegrating into ash and scattering in the wind. But each one lopped off would be replaced by another only a moment later, and it would begin again.

Our timeline for getting out of here had just been drastically shortened.

I shouted into the ear of the girl I was holding, “You have to get out of here, now!”

I spun the girl around so she would not see the horrifying sight and finally released my grip on her.

“Run! And don't look back!”

When she did not listen and tried looking behind her, I ran up and grabbed her by the shoulders. I pushed her onward toward the back of the cavern where it was safer so she'd be one of the next to be carried out. The battle between Rose and Montée raged behind me. I was worried, terrified, for Rose, but I had to get this girl out of here. That was my job right now. For better or worse.

Then the girl tripped and fell face first onto the ground.

She hadn't been all there, and I had been pushing her along.

Was I going too fast for her, or did she trip? Did I lose focus and inadvertently push her down? I don't know. She hiccoughed once, then she started bawling her eyes out and crying. She had finally breached the point beyond fear and panic. The girl broke down and started wailing. Loudly. Then everything got really quiet.

I was terrified, but I looked over my shoulder. There was something looming behind me, and I could not ignore it. There stood Montée, still far in the distance, his head turned over her shoulder and eyes looking right at me. They were pure milky white, but I could tell they were fixed on me. The rest of his body slowly turned to face me. He didn't seem to care about Rose anymore. His eyes were still fixed on me and me alone. Then he roared so loud that I had to cover my ears.

Montée had his own priorities. Things ingrained in him deeper than superficial orders. I remembered the purpose of his existence was as a protector. The wailing and terrified cries of a poor girl in pain was louder than anything else. When he saw me crouched over the girl, he immediately thought I was harming her. His one track mind switched to me. His massive frame started slowly, but quickly picked up speed as he began to charge toward me.

Now it was I who felt like a deer caught in the headlights. The rumble of the ground got louder and louder. It shook more and more until it hurt the soles of my feet. His tentacle arms whipped and cracked, each one capable of cutting me in half with just one flick. The giant's frame bulged with muscles that could flatten me into a paste. All I could do was shiver and hyperventilate.

“Laven!” Rose's voice cried and called out to me.

I shook, startled, but back to my senses. The beast was still bearing down on me, but the girl was also in danger.

“Minte!” I screamed.

The assassin materialized behind me and came running. I picked the girl off the ground and spun her around toward the mantis. Minte's arm blades snapped into position, and her eyes were fixed on the giant.

“Minte! Get this girl out of here!”

Minte tore her eyes off Montée and looked at me confused. She was still running toward us when I shoved the girl who went stumbling into her arms. Minte caught the girl and wrapped her arms around her while staring frightened at me.

“Go! Get her out!”

The assassin looked down at the sobbing girl and then back to me. She was torn, but in the end, she listened and jumped backward off the floor and soared away with the help of her wings. I looked back at Montée who was getting closer and closer.

If I ran, I would never get away. It was too late for that. If I made a break for it to my left or right, he could run past me and chase after the girl. He could stumble through and upon the other girls still hiding and waiting to escape. There was nothing else I could do but stand tall and wait for him to run right into me. So that's what I did. My heart felt like it was about to burst out of my chest, and I was lightheaded from hyperventilating, but I could not go anywhere.

Montée roared again. My ears felt wet. They could be bleeding now for all I knew. He coiled his tentacles and readied them to smash me, crush me underneath.

"Laven!"

Rose's voice cried out a second time, but it was close. Real close. I turned my head and saw Rose sprinting full speed from my right. There wasn't so much as a second for me to relax my knees before her claw grabbed hold of me by the collar of my shirt. She spun around once and with all her strength tossed me into the air. I was too stunned to scream, let alone say a word. I flew the air and hit the ground rolling. I rolled and rolled until I was finally stopped when I collided with a wall. My being hurt or broken didn't register to me at all. I got to my feet, and in a panic, looked back to where I was before.

Rose had taken my place. When the tentacles came, she cut them down one by one, but she missed the fifth and final one. It came down low and wrapped around her ankle. It reeled back and brought Rose along with it. It raked her across the ground and through the rocky debris until flinging her up into the air. I saw something silver spin through the air and with a clatter hit the nearby ground and bounced until it finally slid into the wall next to me. It just barely missed me.

One tentacle held Rose upside down in the air while the others grew back immediately. The others shot out and wrapped around her other limbs to protect themselves from her sharp claws and talons. They wrapped around her and formed a slimy green cocoon around her. It was an incomprehensible mishmash of vine-like rope. Each of the five tips wriggled outside of what looked like the Gordian Knot itself. I watched as the green walls bulged as Rose tried to push her way out, but the whole thing constricted in response. She cried out in pain, but that only allowed it to constrict even further. Rose could no longer even inhale. Montée did not even notice at first, but he quickly became aware and his attention turned back toward the salamander. His eyes narrowed, he bared his teeth and the rest of his face contorted in rage.

Rose's face turned tanned to blue. The sound of bones creaking escaped from inside the green coffin she was held within and the giant tightened his grip with each passing second. Only Rose's

head hung upside down out of it all, her long red ponytail swaying to and fro. I lay broken on the ground, forced to watch.

But my face twitched. My eyes felt like they were on fire, and my heart ready to burst from my chest. An anger smoldered there, and I felt it grow. I felt as my mind started to slip away, and my body began to move on its own.

I sat up and used the wall as a crutch to push with my legs in order to get back onto my feet. The whole time I watched Rose's pained face as she struggled to breath, and her thrashing got weaker. I saw the giant growl louder and tighten his grip even more than before. A weak gasp was all Rose had left. I looked away and down toward her sword which had landed nearby. My old sword. I had given it to her because she had broken her own to save my life. It was better in her hands than in mine. I didn't see that changing anytime soon.

I was just going to borrow it for a bit.

My legs were wobbly at first, so when I leaned down to pick it up, I nearly fell over. When I wrapped my hand around the hilt, I felt the heat which was still rushed over my entire body. It was a familiar heat. Her warm embrace...Still in the blade... The sluggishness in my muscles, and the creaking in my bones disappeared. My eyes felt as though they were in front of the fire pit. Dry, on fire and in extreme pain. I could still feel my heart pound away. As though it would explode if it continued to do so any longer. A second wind and the thumping of adrenaline spread through me from the tips of my toes to the top of my head.

I took a couple cautious steps forward. My legs felt as though they were also on fire, but I refused to fall over. Each new step was easier than the last, and eventually I was walking. The tip of the sword scraped against the ground as I pulled it along with me. When I started off into a jog, I pulled the sword up with me. When I broke into a sprint, I held it firm and steady.

Running right into Montée would be suicide. Even my body seemed to understand that. Instead of crashing right into the giant and swinging at his knees, I broke right. I jumped and planted one foot on a boulder. I leaped off that foot and planted my other foot onto a fallen pillar. I turned my head to the left and kept my eye on the beast. His free hand was rising up and reaching toward Rose's head. A meaty paw that big would have no trouble... The very thought pushed my body onward and infuriated even more.

One slip or foothold crumbling would send me back down to the ground, but I climbed higher and higher until I was on the ruins of what was once the witch's balcony. I turned left and continued running. As his hand got closer and closer, and the life in Rose's body got weaker, I picked up speed. Montée's face, the front of his body, and Rose, all

vanished as I circled around his back. It was a large back, unthinkable to flank, impossible to climb. Not when he was so tall. But I was no longer staring up, and he was no longer paying attention.

It wasn't long until I was directly behind him. I took a sharp turn and then put everything I had into acceleration. I strained my legs to go as fast as possible. I didn't have much floor till the drop back down to the ground level. One step up off a chair and onto a table then one jump, and I was airborne. I put everything I had into clearing the distance toward the brute. I was burning up now, and my passion overflowed and broke free of my chest.

“Let her go!”

I yelled loud and deep. My own throat nearly broke under the strain of my own voice. With my sword held high with the point facing down, I descended upon the back of the giant.

Montée heard the cry and turned ever so slightly. I wasn't going to land directly onto his back, but I had my sword to do that. I missed the back of his head, his neck, but I brought the sword down with everything I had. The tip of the blade stuck between the overlapping grooves of his left shoulder and I heard the sound of splitting flesh.

His reaction was instant. Montée's back arched, and he roared in pain. His feet stomped on the ground, and he stumbled forward. I refused to let go of the sword, so the rest of my body slammed against his back. I held on for dear life as he squirmed trying to shake me off.

I watched his right hand try to reach across and swat me off, but he could not reach around far enough. His arm's muscles were too thick and malformed. He couldn't reach behind his back either. In vain, he tried to reach over his left shoulder, but he could still not stretch far enough. His bulging muscles and misshapen form stopped him from doing so every time. The tentacles growing from his left arm squirmed and writhed in pain as well, but they were in a helpless knot and could not undo themselves. Even if he did, he would simply exchange one problem for another. Yet he still squeezed Rose as hard as he was able. It only made me more mad than before.

I kicked off his back with my feet and pulled myself up by the sword now sticking out of his left shoulder. I lifted my body above the sword where I was still out of reach. I only had to shimmy to the left and right a bit, and his right hand was just a few centimeters out of reach.

“I said, 'let go'!” I yelled again, my voice nearly breaking.

With all my might I pushed the blade further down. The sharp point and edges pushed the flesh aside and with every push the tip of the blade sunk lower and lower. He began to spin round and round, but I found the strength from somewhere to hold on. I got the sword halfway in, and I could feel the bone and sinew rattling against the flat

of the blade. Montée's screams of rage became ones of pain, and his thrashing to get me off got worse and worse. He slammed into a pillar and obliterated it, but I took refuge behind his head and back and held on. Even as the hilt of the sword vibrated with every step he took and with everything he broke, I continued to hold on. My hands might very well be made of nothing more than bone power and jelly right now, but I refused to let go. Now that the blade was halfway in I jumped up and landed further down his back. With all my weight and strength, I pulled the blade down like a lever.

There was a loud snap and a spray of black blood. Montée screamed louder than he had ever done before. The black spray hit me in the face, and it burned like acid, but the pain was dull and didn't faze me in the slightest.

I climbed back up his back and redid my grip on the sword. I was prepared to push it in further and yank down on it again, but I noticed that the idiot was finally backing up instead of stumbling forward and spinning around. The wall was quickly approaching behind me, and Montée was intent on crushing me against it. He was approaching fast, fast enough that the G-forces threatened to crush me against his back before the wall did. I was filled to the brim with rage, so I had more than enough strength to resist. I climbed up and pulled the sword free from his back with everything I had. I then climbed up on his shoulder and jumped off before his body slammed up against the wall.

The ground came up fast, but I hit it as softly as I could. I tucked in and rolled forward as a ball and then as a log until I slammed into a boulder which blocked my path. The soreness in my body was catching up with me. I slammed my fist into the ground and pushed off the ground with it to get back on my feet. My hands were still covered in that black ichor, and the burning sensation it left behind was still there. I wiped left hand clean—thankfully there was no burn mark at all—I wiped the rest off my face and then faced the giant.

Montée left shoulder was drooped. That wasn't enough to stop him though. Even with that same black liquid pouring from his eyes like tears, he peeled himself off the wall and stared back at me. The giant stomped his way toward me and roared. He threw his right arm around in a tantrum and smashed the ground around him with it. I clenched the sword in my right hand and stood tall, unflinching.

“Come on!” I screamed back at him. “Come on!”

While he stomped his way over I took a couple steps of my own against him. I held both my hands out to beckon him closer. Montée actually stopped. He retreated back onto his heel and had a face that looked like he didn't actually know what to do. The giant's face was caught between being enraged and apprehensive. The pain in his left

side was probably still pretty fresh, and I was still holding the black stained sword that did it. He was, however, still growling, gnashing his teeth and roaring at me.

I took another step forward, “COME ON!”

I didn't expect my voice to be so loud. It was louder than Montée's roars, and even he backed away again after hearing it. That only lasted for a moment though. The man would not be intimidated and thumped his hand against his chest and prepared to charge. Until I smelled something in the air. Montée stopped and his nostrils flared as well. Something was... burning.

It did not take long for either of us to see where it was coming from. We both turned our eyes toward the twisted mangle of tentacles and noticed there were a couple of them that were now hanging loose. Rose's head was the only thing poking out of the tangle, and her face had turned from a sickly blue to a flesh red. Her cheeks were also puffed out and full of... air.

Smoke started to pour out from between the tentacles. His reaction was slow, but Montée was once again screaming in pain. The smoke gave way to an orange light glowing behind the mass of green. That didn't last for long because there were soon flames shooting out from where there was smoke. The giant reached over with his right hand to try smothering them, but he pulled his hand away on reflex, like a child who had put his hand on a hot stove. He could do nothing but grin and bear the searing pain overwhelming him.

The green mass of tentacles soon began to deform, and the knot lowered closer to the ground. The slimy vines couldn't hold their shape, and they began to melt. The sick mucous green turned orange and red. His entire left arm became molten. By the time Montée started to back up, he could not support the weight of Rose anymore, and the entire knot separated from the rest of his arm. The painful ripping sound was overpowered only by his own painful cries. I ran toward Rose as her body fell to the floor. My body came to a screeching stop as I knelt down next to her body and held her head in my lap. I didn't even think twice about it. Yet, I didn't burn. Not even while the last pieces of tentacle burned to cinders and blew away as blackened ash.

But the burning did not stop. The fire continued to burn its way up Montée's arm. Smoke billowed from the stump where the rest of his tentacles appendages had melted away. He clutched the stump with his other hand and thrashed about while backing up into the wall again. The end of each tentacle was bubbling and cauterized. They couldn't regenerate.

I shook the girl who was still warm but not moving, “Rose!”

I kept shaking her until she finally started coughing. She struggled to inflate her lungs, and she did so painfully as the rest of her

body was still tender after being nearly crushed to death. At last, she opened her eyes and looked up at me.

"What a pretty shade of red," she said weakly.

I sighed deeply and slumped over. My forehead clonked against her own, and we remained together like that for a moment. At least until she woke up fully.

"Hold up!" She shouted suddenly, and right into my ear.

I pulled back in pain; my ears ringing. She sat straight up and turned to where the giant was. I totally forgot about him for a moment as well. We were both met with something completely different.

Montée had collapsed against the wall. He sat there rocking back and forth while clutching his stump of an arm. Tears of black continued to ooze out of his eyes, and he was... wailing...

"MaMaaaAAaa! MaaAaaMMMmmaaaa! WAaAAaaaaAaaHHhhhHHhH!"

The giant was sobbing. Uncontrollably. My knuckles were white from holding the sword. I let my grip slacken which also caused the rest of my strength to leave my body. The sword clatter back to the ground. Every limb of mine went from feeling like steel to wet noodles. My heart—which had been on fire and raging—burnt out. Completely calm. Looking at him now invoked a powerful feeling of pity.

"USELESS!"

A girl's voice dripping with venom broke the calm. The Crone appeared above us all, walking across the air on invisible steps and looked down with disdain at her crippled giant.

"Is no amount of strength good enough for you? You miserable failure!"

She kept piling the abuse on Montée, but I wasn't sure he heard her at all. He was too busy rocking back and forth on the floor while trying to nurse his still boiling wound.

"Get up! After all this time, your still gonna act like a child. Act just like when I saved your pitiful life?"

He kept crying and didn't respond.

the Crone's pupils shrunk, and a shadow spread over her face. "Fine. So be it."

The cavern rumbled. Dust and pebbles lifted from the ground into the air all around us. Electricity buzzed and lightning bolts flickered freely all around. The air around the Crone became heavy, and the space around her lit up with red magic circles large and small. They orbited around her as though she were the sun; and just like the sun, she glowed brighter as an aura of power grew in strength around her.

Ba'el came sprinting across the cavern floor, screaming, "Crone! Knock it off!"

The witch did nor hear her or, more likely, did not care.

“In the end, everything is on me. Everyone fails and fails and fails and fails and fails. Fails, fails, fails, FAILS, FAILS, FAILS!... No matter how much I help. No matter what I do. Everyone turns back to me to solve their problems for them in the end. Fine. I'll make it all go away. I'll clean up your mess, you useless child. You can disappear along with it!”

the Crone concentrated the aura she generated into a massive ball of raw magical energy. She held it up high above us, above her own head, and then threw it down toward the ground. If it was as heavy as it looked, it would crush Rose and me to death. But that wasn't the real problem. There was enough destructive power in that much raw magical energy to vaporize everything in its blast radius and scatter each atom in every direction.

Ba'el came running across the cavern and vaulting over the boulders, screaming, “Crone!”

Summoning her scythe, she grabbed it tight and placed herself between us and the spell by leaping into the air while summoning the same invisible steps that the Crone used. It hit her like a truck, but she stopped it in its tracks. At first.

It was slowly pushing her back down toward us, and it showed no sign of slowing down. Ba'el's scythe started to crack. The blade began to warp. Even one of her horns gave off a loud snap as fractures split along it. She could not control it, nor could she let it continue to push her aside. The powerful winds from the red sun of magic whipped and tore Ba'el's cape into tatters, and smoke began to rise across her skin as it started to burn her. The demon could not stop the spell, so she did the next best thing. She deflected it.

The red sun came in at an angle; and with all her strength, Ba'el flung it straight up. I wasn't sure if that was much better because it slammed into the ceiling. It didn't detonate in any traditional way an explosive would. There were fireworks, but reality seemed to quake when all that energy ruptured free from the orb. The cavern shook and buckled throughout the battle, but it had yet to be hit by a true earthquake. That is exactly what happened. The whole mountain was rocked to its core. It's very existence had been compromised by the Crone's destructive spell.

Cracks in the ceiling spread as though the whole roof were made of eggshell. Large slabs of rock peeled free and rained down from above. Rose and I pulled one another back and forth to try avoiding everything from baseball-sized stones to car-sized boulders. The quake kept going and going and refused to stop. The whole mountain was rocking back and forth, and I wasn't sure how much longer it could keep doing so without collapsing entirely.

My mind raced immediately to the remaining few orphans we

had yet to evacuate.

After half a minute, the earthquake finally ended, and particles of red light left over from the spell were the only things raining down from above. But the cracks in the ceiling were still spreading. The groan of warping stone filled my ears. But so too did the sound of crying. Rose and I heard it, and we both saw two more girls huddled together. High above them, a precarious slab of rock slowly broke free from the wall. No. It was the wall itself coming down.

I stood up to rush towards them, but that took too long. The wall came loose, and an avalanche of stone came tumbling down. I tried running, but there was no way I was going to make it. Would it matter if I did? I couldn't do anything. There was someone left who could though.

Montée stomped across the cavern with reckless abandon. His instincts were stronger than pain, and he crushed everything underfoot as he ran toward the girls. He slammed his shoulder into the wall as it came tumbling down. The top half broke over his head and continued to fall, but the bottom missed the girls underneath. The giant's feet were slipping as the rest of the slab pushed him back. He had one arm to hold it back; but even then, he was only so strong.

There was my chance.

I threw myself forward with the same recklessness. It felt like I was running underneath a giant wave of water about to break against the shore. I wrapped my arms around each girl and continued running full speed. I dared not look back as the sound of crashing rock shook behind me. The dust overwhelmed me as it blew past, and I eventually had to stop running when I began to choke on it. The girls could no longer cry; they could only cough uncontrollably as well. I collapsed onto my knees.

“Laven!” I heard Rose yell.

She climbed over the collapsed wall, and her face lit up with relief when she saw the two girls and I were safe. I let the girls down and then turned toward the pile of ruin. I approached it slowly as Rose descended from above. It was at the bottom of the pile where I saw the sad conclusion to a painful story.

Montée's head was laying on the ground. The rest of his body was buried, and the ground was his pillow as his cheek rested against the floor. Rose was eager to run right into me with a hug that would be more like a tackle, but she stopped when she got near and looked down at the broken man. Even as the rest of the cavern was still shaking, I circled 'round to look into his eyes. His breathing was labored, wheezy, and it sounded as though his lungs were either crushed or punctured. Freshly coughed black blood had pooled underneath his mouth. He remained motionless; there was only the

faint passing of air into and out of his agape mouth.

I knelt down in front of him, and I sensed his white eyes looked at me. There was no rage in them. No pain or sadness. There was simply nothing at all. His jaw twitched a few times.

“KiiiIIDsssSSsss. SaaaaAAAAaaaffffffFFFfe?” His deep monstrous voice droned in pain.

I looked back over to the two girls who had stopped crying and looked back at me with terror still in their eyes.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“GoooOOOooOooooD,” He tried to say with a smile. “MOOooN.... GoooOOoo. NoOooW. MaaAama... JeEeesssSsss. ThhhHhEeeeeY. AaaarEeee. WaaaITtttt...IiiinnnGggGGggg. FooooR... MoOOoonNnnN.”

Mont....No. Montgomery's eyes drooped lazily and shot open wide one more time. His milky white eyes rolled to the back of his head and returned a deep brown. The black pupils of his eyes opened wide, and one last smile spread across his face. That smile on his face was his last act. And it froze in place.

Aside from the clacking of a few loose rocks. The entire cavern went silent for a moment. Even the Earth stood still, just like time did.

“Eeee he he he he he he he heee!”

the Crone broke the silence. She cackled while she climbed over a pile of stones in front of us and stared down at the four of us gathered around the fallen giant. She had lost her hat, the twintails on her head had disheveled into only one and her robe was torn nearly clean off. A demented smile was slapped across her face, but she still looked down with a crooked and disgusted expression. She must think that she was looking at a joke in poor taste, and she was trying hard not to laugh too hard.

“Did the boy finally get this wish? Such a shame. But that's how all dreams end, don't they?”

I don't know how long those two were together. I don't know how long this man... boy... was her plaything, but she didn't have a shred of sympathy for him. He was just a thing. I see now that everything extraneous around the Crone had been removed. All that was left was an insane, bitter and cruel old woman in a young girl's body radiating with power beyond her control.

Another voice called out quietly, “...Hilda...”

Ba'el was climbing over a pile of rocks behind us. She swaggered back and forth. Her whole body appeared limp. A shadow was cast across her face, hiding the expression she was wearing. Half a tattered green cape billowed behind her. She was bleeding in places, covered in light scorch marks and had bruises all over.

“...You...”

Her voice reverberated with something unnatural. Something else spoke just quiet enough to not be heard, but it shook her voice with otherworldly power. I recalled the strange noises the Crone's own voice made when she was casting the spell to summon this demon in the first place. That was it. There was something demonic being carried along with Ba'el's sweet childish voice.

the Crone's face slowly went pale

Ba'el's limp body went rigid. She clenched her fists, and her hoof crushed a stone underneath her to dust. She looked upward, and I saw that the green of her eyes was gone. There were two pools of blood red light shining from her eyes. A purplish-black aura billowed around her and pebbled lifted into the air surrounding her. Winds of magic swirled around her and kicked up dust.

“HILDA!” She roared.

The red light of her eyes was broken by two vertical slits of purest black.

Chapter 82

Tremors continued to rock the earth as the cavern slowly came down piece by piece. The feeling of claustrophobia become more intense, and one had to watch where they stepped least they be clobbered over the head by falling debris. But even with all the violence and destruction that had occurred, it was not until now that the air itself had rumbled. A loud crack split that quivering air, and the Crone was sent reeling on the flat of her feet. The witch's small body was reinforced by magic and protected by a strong barrier, so she weathered the impact better when it took a wall to stop her. It was just more damage for the mountain to endure. The very foundation of the Sabbath's lair was teetering on the precipice of imploding at any moment, and nothing was going to stop it now.

What harm could a few more sledgehammer blows do?

The witch was able to take a hit or two without being reduced to a fine meat paste. When she uncrossed her arms from in front of her face, anyone could see she looked far worse for wear compared to a minute ago. The Crone couldn't stay still for long; she fled as Ba'el came crashing into the wall after her like a runaway freight train. The collision spewed more dust and debris into the cavern, and the buckling walls fractured and threatened to collapse that much sooner.

The ancient witch's haughty face, twisted by madness, was now full of terror and confusion. Her robes were barely holding together, and bruises covered her body. That giant black hat of her had been obliterated, and the twintails in her green hair—which had long sense lost their silky luster and been dyed with gray dust and red blood—had been reduced by one. Sweat trickled down her cheeks as the demon pursuing her emerged from the cloud left behind by the destruction. Two red orbs emerged first, swaying back and forth in the cloud of grey. Black, soulless and slitted pupils blighted the land of the living with an otherworldly anger.

A concussion wave from the demon's point of impact had washed over the cover Rose and I hid behind. We held on tight to a couple of scared girls who were shaking in fear; the possibility they could be blown away seemed real. Looking into the eyes of that demon didn't make things any better for them either so we did our best to shield their eyes. Rose had entertained the thought of testing the demon's mettle once, now even she seemed discouraged from doing so.

Their battle was close enough that we could still hear their conversation carry over the occasional rumbling and sliding of the mountain.

the Crone sounded almost as if she were begging when she

spoke, “B-Ba'el... stop.”

“It's far too late for that,” Ba'el snapped back without mercy.

A sinister second voice spoke along with the little girl's. A deep, warped and evil warble was interwoven with her own words. It wasn't something heard with you ears. They were words that made my brain feel as though it were bleeding from the inside. A pressure built up with every syllable she spoke, and it often did not entirely dissipate fast enough before she started speaking again.

“I've taught you many things, and you chose to ignore the most important parts. Now I have nothing left to teach you, so we'll move onto your final exam.”

the Crone wasn't ready to throw in the towel yet. As the demon clopped hoof by hoof closer with a casual stroll, the witch summoned a plethora of red pentagrams. They spun and shone brightly behind the witch and then let loose a barrage of magic missiles. They zipped and screeched toward the demon, but Ba'el was unfazed. She walked among the deadly projectiles as they whizzed past her and exploded all around her in brief flashes of white light. The Crone was tossing them wildly, and the demon was walking through them without a care in the world. Her old student didn't appear to be aiming at all. Panic and desperation seemed to have set in. When one finally did slam into the side of Ba'el's face it left an ugly scorch mark behind, but it didn't even slow her down. The damage was being done, but the demon's body simply wrote a rain check on the consequences.

Ba'el pressed onward weathering the occasional hit until she was close and jabbed the Crone square in the chest. A flash of red sparked from the point of impact when Ba’el’s fist collided with the Crone. The blow sent her flying head over heels before landing flat on the ground with a splat many meters away. Her protective barrier flickered weakly a couple of times before fading back into invisibility.

“Wait... One second....” the Crone begged while trying to catch her breath.

“You blew your load early, but I ain't the kind of gal who is gonna wait around for you to get it up again,” Ba'el snide still rumbled with demonic menace.

When the witch finally got to her feet, the demon grabbed her roughly by the collar and lifted her off the ground. The Crone gasped for breath while kicking her feet in vain. She couldn't even protest since what fabric little fabric still clinging to her was wrapping tight around her neck.

“You forget... You can't harm me, “the Crone said, trying to put on a brave face by smiling weakly. “You know that... Not without-”

“-Breaking the contract,” Ba'el replied, getting to the point.

the Crone cackled and smiled weakly with knowing eyes,

“That's right. What were those three rules again? Come on. Tell me again for old time's sake. What do they mean to a demon?”

Ba'el continued to glower at the witch. With how red and menacing her eyes were, I would not be surprised to see them bore a hole through the little girl she was lifting up in front of her.

“So? Come on now. Just-”

Slam. Crack.

the Crone's head snapped backward and bounced back to where it was in an instant. It was accompanied with another brilliant flash from the Crone's protective barrier. A barrier which now had a long crack in it. That ancient witch's face shot from smug to mortified; it was though her entire world view was cracking just like her shield underneath Ba'el's superhuman strength. The demon's fist was shrouded in an aura of green flame.

“Question one: How much time does it take to properly repair a guardian ward?” Ba'el asked.

The demon didn't even give the witch a second to answer. She threw her fist in a right hook that caught the witch from the side. Her tattered black robe couldn't hold together, and the fabric tore loose from Ba'el's grip. The sound of breaking glass was even louder than before. Flakes of red shot off the barrier surrounding the witch as she flew through the distance in a wide arc. It was a trajectory which only stopped by prematurely smashing through a pile of rocks before hitting the floor.

“Trick question: No amount of time is fast enough.”

The two of them were now heading off into the distance, so now was our chance to crawl from out of cover.

“We need to get moving,” I said with urgency.

I picked up the orphan and placed the girl on her shaky feet. Rose was not so quick though. She continued to look off into the distance where she followed the movements of the witch and demon.

“Rose?”

“The fight is over,” She said, but it wasn't to answer me.

I took a closer look at Rose; her delightful face full of vigor had been replaced by the shadow of lucidity. Her eyes were somber as she watched their fight rage on. Now that I thought twice about it, there wasn't a fight in the world she wouldn't enjoy. Why was she watching what was unfolding now with a look of pity?

Rose tore her eyes off of it and looked up at me and finally answered me.

“It was like watching two old friends having a spat. They were trying to understand each other. That's all gone now. It's... ugly.”

Now I thought I was hearing things. Rose was telling me the fight between those two had gotten 'ugly'? Her insight into these types

of things were sharp... Perhaps the only time she was insightful... But it made me take a second look at those two again. If I looked past the red eyes and fury of the demon and interpreted the shaky voice and pleading of the witch a little differently. Their battle had been violent and brutal since the start, or so I thought. Was I mistaken? If they were merely 'talking' before, then I shudder now to think this is what a real fight is. This is no longer a battle between ideals. This is life and death with a healthy dose of rage and vengeance.

Another tremor. It caused my train of thought to crumble. This wasn't just another aftershock; it came from beneath, and it swallowed up a whole section near one corner of the cavern. It left nothing but a bottomless pit behind. This mountain was hollowed out like an ant colony, so it threatened to fold no different from a house of cards. I pried my eyes away from the brutal spectacle and turned back to Rose.

"Let them sort it out!" I shouted back, "We gotta get out of here. Now!"

Rose shook her head and leaped up. We were greeted with the crumble and scraping of rock. Leaping off one pile of rubble to the next was Chris. She held two girls under her wings while a third hung from her neck; riding piggyback.

Chris sounded off when she reached us, "Reporting for-"

A large rock fell from above and bounced off her skull. It was about the size of a basketball. That had to hurt, but it only caused her to wince once, blink twice and pause for a second before repeating herself.

"-Reporting for duty!"

Chris set the two girls down; they refused to stray far and clung to her legs. Maybe because all the jumping around and up and down gave them motion sickness? Just as likely they feared the falling rocks and inevitable doom more than they did the giant wyvern-girl.

She saluted now that her wings were free and continued, "I did one last flying sweep and found these three!"

"You can handle five more?" I asked.

"Yeah," Chris replied and then looked between Rose and I. "What about you two?"

"Can you handle seven... no... eleven?"

Chris looked at me, but she couldn't keep a straight honest face for long.

"Just get the kids out of here. Then get them off the mountain. Getting them out of this cave won't mean a thing if it collapses with all of them on top of it."

"But-" Chris blurted out

She was quickly cut off.

“Leave it to us, Chris,” Rose said pounding a claw against her chest. “I'll get us out of here.”

Hearing that from Rose made me feel a bit better, but I still had to ask, “How?”

Rose raised her fingers tipped with sharp and wriggled them in front of me.

She flashed me a smile and replied, “We'll climb out.”

It was a better plan than waiting to be crushed to death. I gently grabbed hold of the two kids under our protection and brought them over to Chris. They had watched their friends be carried off, so they didn't need too much prodding and guiding by now. They latched onto Chris where they could: Two for each leg, one piggyback riding and two more clinging onto her tail for dear life.

There simply wasn't any more room after that. She wasn't built to handle any more weight and still be able to fly. Even if she had the energy to transform right now, she'd never fit through the small opening in the roof. Despite all that, Chris looked back at me one more time. The apprehension in her face was palpable.

“We're running out of time!” I yelled over the ever more frequent rumbling of the earth. “Get these girls out of here. Tell Minte and Susan to get all these kids off this mountain. Now!”

Chris was reluctant, but she turned around, got a running start and then took off. She was getting tired. This last takeoff was clumsy and slow compared to the others. Had we all tried to get out at once, we would have surely fallen back to the ground. The wyvern flapped her leathery wings as hard as she could. Her face was red, and she was sweating, but she picked up enough speed and circled around the cavern while dodging falling rocks. She managed to pick up enough speed at last and shot up and out of the cavern. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Alright,” Rose cheered and clenched her claw. “It's our turn now. Laven, make for the wall. If ya see any rope on the way, grab it; it'll make this easier.”

She started running and rummaging through the debris as she did. I caught myself standing still after everything I had said about getting the hell out here. There was something off. I felt a great deal of tension lift from my shoulders when I watched Chris and those kids clear the cavern, but there was still a lump in my heart and a prick stinging me from the back of my head. I couldn't shake the feeling, and it continued to nag at me. In desperation, I thought on it with everything I had. Was there something I was forgetting? There would be no turning back after we left.

Those five kids and Chris made it out. Another two with Minte before that. Four more were flown out by Chris and then... Twenty-

nine. Twenty-nine in total. Only... Twenty-nine.

"We can't find-"

Feena's freckled face came back to me. Gloria's frantic expression followed right after. They couldn't find...

My heart stopped. I felt as though time had stopped, but a baseball sized rock bounced off my shoulder. I barely even felt it. The numb stinging only led my imagination down an even worse path. The smallest and most fragile of all the girls was still-

"Laven!" Rose shouted back toward me.

The image of a little face, bright with an innocent smile and adorned with golden curls bubbled back up in my mind. The smallest and most vulnerable girl of them all was still-

"Laven! Come on-" Rose bellowed louder than before.

I looked up after being called out a second time. Her expression was impatient, concerned, but she read the look on my face immediately. Her voice died off; she knew something was wrong, and she didn't stop to ask. Rose came running back, this time with a length of rope draped from her shoulder.

"Heather..." I said with raspy breath.

Before Rose could return, I turned and ran. My mind was full of unpleasant thoughts. So many fallen rocks. Too many collapsed walls and sinkholes. We had managed to do our best to keep the girls safe and get them out, but we had lost track of one. Somewhere near the beginning little Heather had got separated from the rest. In my panic from before, I had completely shut down Feena and Gloria. They were looking for her. There wasn't anyone else she was closer to, and she fled from those two. Why would she? Where was she?

Another explosion and wail from the Crone reminded me of one more possibility. Could she have gotten mixed up in the cross fire between-

"Laven! Stop!" Rose screamed into my ear.

She had caught up quickly. With just one claw on my shoulder she reigned me in and held me back. There was no time to hear the question; my mind raced to spill the words out of my mouth.

"We're missing one! There's a girl missing!"

I turned around and met Rose's eyes. They were opened wide and mirrored my own panic.

"Who? What girl? What does she look like?" She hurriedly asked, slurring her words just as much as I was.

"The youngest one, the smallest one, golden curls for hair!"

A rumble, crash and shaking of the earth nearly knocked both of us off our feet. It came from above. While the cavern was still barely holding together, the rest of the mountain above and below us was twisting, crumbling, warping and imploding. The architecture of this

place wasn't going to hold on for much longer.

"We're runnin' outta time!" Rose yelled.

She didn't need to say it. I threw her claw off and started running again. She gasped in surprise and shouted after me. I had to look. I was surprised I managed to shake her off, but I was more worried about looking for the girl. Chris hadn't seen her while flying over. Maybe she had fallen into- NO... She's hiding. She's been hiding somewhere almost all this time. She wasn't the first or only... There were piles of rubble everywhere...

I shook my head and kept running. She was small, maybe she hadn't run too far from where Feena and Gloria had been searching for Heather? Heather was a small girl. She could fit nearly anywhere. I kept that in my mind as I took a sharp right and ran back to that corner of the cavern. It wasn't far, but it had changed. A lot. A whole section of it had already crumbled, and the whole corner had collapsed. There was a slope of pulverized rock three stories down. If she were down there-

I didn't dare. I looked to the walls and the rubble instead. Rose was chasing after me and calling out to me the whole time, but I didn't stop for a moment. I kicked off the rocks crowning some piles, I slowed down to look into a few crevices, but I never heard or saw anything. By chanced I spied an alcove in the wall. It was small, it was short, but it wasn't something freshly gouged into the wall. There's no way I'd ever hope to fit into it, but that was far from the point. I ran toward it, then dropped flat onto my stomach and stared inside. It was pitch black, but I could still make out the outline of something inside.

"Heather!" I screamed.

Something inside froze still, tried to hold its breath but couldn't hold on for long, and it started to shudder. We didn't have any time to spare, so I stuck my hand inside and tried to reach out for the girl... Except this time I couldn't reach far enough. I had managed to pull that one scared girl along kicking and screaming, but I couldn't force Heather out of her hole.

"Heather. It's me, Laven. Come on. You can't stay in there. We have to go!"

The girl was just another couple arm lengths out of reach. It was a tight spot, and my body was much too large to even think of crawling in any further. A dizzy and sickening feeling of claustrophobia made my stomach do back flips stopped me from even trying. It seemed to open up so that she could sit curled up with her knees tucked into her chest, but there was just no physical means for me to crawl in after her.

No matter how far I tried to reach with my hand, the girl did not respond. Neither did she move closer. She reminded me of a petrified

rabbit deep in its burrow. Then Rose approached and stood beside me.

"Is she really there? We gotta hurry, Laven."

The acoustics of that hole in the wall were something else. An ear piercing shriek echoed off the walls and hit me like a turbo charged drill bit boring into my skull. Heather came to life in an instant and retreated further into the burrow until she could go no further. I had to pull back my hand to cover my ringing ears.

Why?

I didn't have to think too long. The pieces well into place rather quickly. Rose squat down next to me when she heard the scream, and she became concerned. She also placed a reassuring claw on the back of my head when I writhed in pain from having a sonic lance shoved through my already weary ear drums.

"Laven? What's the problem?"

I had to pull back and sit my butt down in front of the opening. The ringing in my ears, the rumbling of the earth and the sound of the battle being waged behind us were all weighting down on me rather harshly. Our time was limited, and I didn't know when everything would come crumbling down. But I couldn't leave Heather here. No matter what.

I looked over to Rose, "You need to step back."

She was a little slow on the pickup.

"You're scaring her."

The look on Rose's face told me that she simply wasn't able to conceive why. That she hadn't done anything wrong was likely what was going through her head right now.

"Just step back. Please."

Rose stood back up and slowly backed away. She looked up toward the ceiling and all around, studying the walls and keeping an eye on falling rocks. Her eyes kept track of the battle I could still hear being waged between the witch and demon. I'd need to convince Heather to come out, and I would have to do it fast. I just had to coax a single terrified five year old that the monster under her bed just wanted to join her tea party. It couldn't be that hard, right?

"Heather. I need you to listen and listen carefully."

Too forceful. My tone was far too forceful to be speaking to a child. I had to take a deep breath to calm down. It was a tall order. The specter of death was looming over all our shoulders. It put a damper on my mood.

"I know you are scared, but you have to come out of there. The roof is going to fall."

"No!" Heather screamed back.

The whine of energy and the sound of artificially pulverized of

rock washed from the far side of the cavern to us. Rose had stepped back like I asked, and her voice fluttered back as she kept an eye on it.

"Laven, we need to move," Rose said, sounding dire.

I heard her and pressed on.

"Heather," I said her name in too harsh a tone again, "I'm sorry. I lied to you and everyone else. I'm not Lola. There was never a Lola. But I did all that for all you girls. I was never going to hurt any of you. You might not believe that, but it's true. And I'm not going to hurt you now."

Silence. It was better than a 'no' at least.

"The headmaster was in on it... Before she went bad... That's why she was able to call me out before. See?... Hey. Remember the cleaning? The piggyback ride? The cafeteria when I made the bully go away?... I need you to trust me. If you can't, you just need to do it one more time. There won't be another time if you don't trust me and stay in there. You need to let me help you... Let us help you."

On the word 'us' I saw the girl flinch. She was still sensitive to Rose's presence nearby. I could see the silhouette of her head shake violently back and forth.

"No! Don't wanna be eaten!"

The whine of magic and the sundering of stone was getting closer.

"Laven. Sooner is better than later," Rose said, her voice gone from dire to deeply concerned.

I closed my eyes and knit my eyebrows together. My time at that abbey had been short, and I had missed out on those prayers and lessons those girls had to attend. Now I was starting to understand at last what those kinds of lectures and prayer sessions entailed. These were orphans, the most vulnerable. They were the powerless, and they were all girls. There was a temptation within reach, and the Church knew it. They were terrified these girls might learn of it. The Crone knew about it as well. It didn't take much of a push; and one day later, we had lost ten souls to her without a fight.

Who wants to be scared and powerless forever when they needn't be? How do you convince them there is no other option? By filling their heads with misinformation. It worked for the Crone who no doubt promised no strings attached magic powers and youth... It would of course work the other way around. Who would willingly set themselves onto the dinner plates of hungry monsters or offer their souls to damnation?

"Her name is Rose. And she's not going to eat you."

"No!"

She was still stubborn and terrified.

“Do you at least trust me?”

Silence again. I decided to take that meant it wasn't a 'no'.

“Good. Then you can trust her.”

The little girl's response was slow, but it was the clutch question, “...Why?”

I was expecting that question to come up eventually. Somewhere in the back of my head I had already settled on the best way to answer it. Something said which this little girl would understand. That did not make it any easier for me to say it. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. My lips flapped uselessly; a second attempt got a few murmurs out. I took a couple of deep breathes, stilled my beating heart and spoke softly.

“Because she's my wife.”

I could feel a neck twist, and a pair of eyes bury themselves into the back of my head. There was an uncontrollable wincing on my behalf, and my face flushed red. I even tried to say it as quiet as I could. Rose hadn't lost her composure and pounced on me, so maybe I was lucky, and she wasn't quite sure what she heard. Still, her instincts and ears were inhumanly sharp.

The seconds passed like hours. Heather did not make a sound, and I wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad one. On one hand, she had yet to reject what I had said, but she didn't seem to accept it either. But there was eventually a shift and a shuffle. I put myself flat on my stomach again and reached into the hole. Something tiny and fragile placed itself on the palm of my hand.

I gently grabbed hold and slowly helped pull the girl free. Heather's nightgown was tattered, torn and dusty. The natural blond curls in her hair were a mess and matted. She looked more like a stray dog than a child. When I pulled her out I picked her up, and she hugged tightly onto my chest. She buried her face as she trembled, and fresh tears soaked my breast. Heather hiccoughed weakly as she tried to hold back from wailing uncontrollably.

“Laven! Move it!” Rose yelled.

There was no time to stand around and bask in the glow of reuniting. Rose tugged me hard once by the back of my shirt's collar, and we both ran and jumped over a boulder for cover. A human sized projectile blew away the wall we were just at with the destructive power of an explosive cannon ball. I wrapped my arm around Heather's head when the shower of rocks rained down, and all three of us coughed when the billowing cloud of dust tumbled outward from the explosion.

I looked over at the devastation and saw the Crone stuck in the wall. The limestone looked more like drywall given how it gave out so easily from such a small girl. Her chest puffed out and retreated back, so she was still alive, but the red barrier that protected her had many

holes in it as it shimmered and shone constantly. It had lost the ability to be invisible; and just like a dying light bulb, it was flickering and soon to go out completely.

There was no sign of Ba'el, but that would soon change. We needed to get moving before they returned to exchanging blows.

Rose was already getting busy with the rope she had found. When I turned my attention to her, she had already tied a third of the rope securely around her waist. She tossed the other end toward me. With one arm cradling Heather's bottom against my chest, I caught it with my free hand.

"Tie it good and tight. Come on!" Rose said urgently.

I studied the end of the rope. My eyes then wandered over the shivering girl who was still refusing to even look at Rose and was smushing her face into my shoulder. Then I looked over to Rose, who was looking up and pointing out a climbing path along the wall. Her tail sparked, but my eye spied it sputter a couple of times. My heart sunk; but at the same time, it glowed warm in my chest. A feeling of calm washed over me, and I had pushed into a second wind within my resolve.

A tight knot around Heather's waist is what was needed. I told her to bear with it when she winced in pain. If it wasn't tight, there was a good chance it would hurt a lot later. The fall would kill her, and I would never allow that after being given the good fortune of her still being alive and in one piece. When I finished with the improvised knot and harness I set the girl gently on the ground and stood up. Rose and I stood up at the same time, and she turned to me with one last smile. No doubt she was very proud of herself. It put my mind at ease. She had confidence in a climbing plan she had devised on the fly. That smile didn't last long though. Rose's eyes followed the rope from her waist down to Heather. The little girl ducked behind me when the salamander's gaze reached her.

"Laven?" Rose said with a hollow voice.

"Go," I said.

Rose was confused.

"Laven?" She said again, pleading this time.

"Get Heather out of here."

Nothing but silence from her.

"You're running on fumes, Rose. You don't have to try hiding it. I know you better than that."

Rose shook her head, but I interrupted her when she tried to protest.

"Heather and I are too much weight for you to handle right now... Take the girl."

Rose looked at me with a thousand yard stare.

“We don't have the time for this, Rose. The girl has priority.”

Rose's eyes drifted toward the floor; her eyes glistened once again, but only because of the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Rose. I have one more piece of unfinished business here, so take the girl and go. Get her off the mountain.”

I slowly closed my eyes. I put a hand on top of Heather's head and gently ruffled her unkempt curls in my hand. There was still a warmth in that girl which gave me the resolve to carry on. I let go out her hair and then clenched those fists at my sides.

“Go to the river. Meet up with the others.... When dawn comes look behind you. It won't be a trick on your eyes, and it won't be a phantom... I'll promise you this: I'll be there.”

I opened my eyes, and Rose was already on top of me. Her breast pushed up against my chest, her claws wrapped around my neck and she stood up on the tips of her talons. Rose's lips pressed up my own. Her hot breath tickled me, and an incredible amount of warmth from her internal fire washed over into me. I slowly closed my eyes again and let the feeling of her lips and her scent dominate my senses. My sore limbs and cold blood warmed up on the spot... But I had felt her warmer than this before. She really couldn't hide it. Rose was running out steam.

My clenched fists relaxed. My shaking hands went still, and my knuckles which felt chilled came to life once again. I reached up with my hands, and the tips of my fingers grazed her thin waist, barely, but I pulled back. I reached up and placed my hands on her shoulders instead and slowly pushed her away. Rose pulled back as I pushed, and our lips separated. I opened my eyes again and saw our breath mingled in what little room there was between us.

Rose's amber eyes looked up at me, they were still wet, but they had not yet broken free into full-fledged tears. I kept pushing her back slowly, gradually. I had to put some force into it, but eventually she rolled back onto the heels of her talons, and her claws unlocked around my neck. She took a few steps backward, very slowly. Heather was still clinging to my leg, and she was looking up at both of us with a stupor of disbelief. That was very likely the first time she had ever witnessed something like that. Perhaps she had only heard why such a thing like that is done. I placed my hand back on her head and guided her so she stood in front of me.

“Heather. Go with Rose now. Your sisters are worried and waiting for you. Tell them... and everyone, that I'll make my way down soon.”

The little girl was no longer clinging desperately to me. Rose had turned around and knelt down. She held her claws out as footsteps for Heather to jump on her back. She hesitated for a few

seconds, but she eventually climbed up on the salamander's back. Rose stood up with the girl's arms wrapped tightly around her neck. Her fiery tail was still burning, but it sputtered a couple times. Rose did not turn around again. She walked over to the wall and dug her claws into the stone. Her sharp claws made solid holds out of the wall. The talons on her feet made good footholds as well.

I watched the girl move up the wall like a gecko. She quickly cleared one story, then two, soon she was above the crumbled balcony. My heart nearly stopped when the ground shook again, and one of her claw holds came loose. A portion of the wall fell out, and she had to swing aside as it fell and crashed into the ground only a few meters in front of me. Heather shrieked in fright; but with the rope connecting them and her clinging for dear life, they kept together until Rose shifted over to the left and got a better hold.

The angle of the ceiling got extreme near the end, but Rose clung tightly against the wall and scurried along. She quickly reached the opening in the ceiling from where the pale moonlight shone in. The red moon had finally subsided at last. With one last burst of strength and flare of heat from her tail, Rose crawled out of the cavern with Heather on her back. I continued to stare up at the skylight for a few seconds. Rose made no move to return. We didn't have enough rope to string down so that I could climb up either. Everyone else was busy getting the hell off this mountain like I had asked. I sighed in relief.

I continued to stand my ground and looked up with a smile on my face even as the ground shook once more, and an avalanche of rocks from higher up the mountain slid over the opening in the ceiling and blocked it off. A few stones and boulders slipped through the opening and came crashing down in the center of the cavern, but when the rumbling stopped, the only light that remained was a few stubborn flicking candles, lamps and the glowing aura of two ancient beings engaged in battle.

There was still one last order of business. I turned around and watched as the illuminated figure of Ba'el was striding toward the battered and bruised body of the Crone.

“Alright... Alright... You win...” the Crone said, wheezing.

She sounded as though one of her lungs had collapsed.

She strained to cackle and taunted Ba'el further, “Are you quite done with your temper tantrum by now-”

Ba'el grabbed hold of the witch's head in her paw, pulled it back and then slammed it back against the wall. The thunderous splintering stone heralded the ruthlessly strong blow. I studied the Crone's face from a distance, but I could still see the overt pain on her face. A splotch of red remained where her head was resting now. That expression on her face implied to me that the agony she was

experiencing was alien to her. Indeed, the shield which had been protecting her until now had been broken.

The demon took a couple steps back to let that sink in. The Crone peeled off the wall, slid back down to the floor and collapsed there in a heap. She was messed up. That little girl face of hers, stolen straight from some stereotypical fifties' advertisement, had been on the receiving end of a beating one time too many. It was swollen, blackened, brutalized. She was still completely shocked as her hands reached up as if to hold her head from splitting apart. I'm sure that was it felt like after having one's head slammed into a wall that hard.

“Why?” the Crone wheezed. “What do you gain by taking all your self loathing out on me?”

Ba'el's tail swished, and her ears twitched. She grabbed hold of the Crone and lifted her off the ground and pressed her back against the wall.

The witch cracked a smile missing a couple of teeth and cackled, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Who is the biggest hypocrite of them all?”

Ba'el's paws clenched tighter and made it even more difficult for the Crone to breathe.

“What have... What have I done that you haven't? Huh? I... I just wanted to give back... To all the children. To all the powerless people. I've asked for far less in return than you ever have... Well? What do you say to that, Ba'el?”

“That was a lifetime ago, Hilda.” Ba'el's voice rumbled.

the Crone's smile widened to hear the demon respond.

“A demon... Doesn't have lifetimes... Just one long... unending... existence. Something like you does not get to say otherwise.”

the Crone's swollen and blackened eyes opened wide with realization.

“Maybe you actually think that,” She couldn't hold back her laughter, even in the position she was in, “Ha ha ha! Then why don't you just go back to the hells and sit there? Huh? Why not? Can you answer that much?”

Ba'el did not respond to that; she merely continued to glare at the witch.

“I. Thought. So... Eee hee hee hee. You wake up lost and confused. Missing parts of yourself. Finding something else there instead... Did you actually think for even just a moment you could ever be anything else? A demon takes and takes and takes. Even when she gives, it's only in return for something far more valuable. If I go away, do you think you can really leave the past behind? The past isn't in me. I'm building a new future, the future the Demon Lord wishes for every

living thing from this corner of the world to the other. Isn't that what you want? I know that is what you want. You've always had a soft spot, even for a demon. So why not just give into that desire of yours?"

the Crone's eyes narrowed, and her voice became deep.

"It's because of the past. The past in you, Ba'el. You carry it wherever you go. That's why the world always seemed to move on while you stayed the same. You hid right under my nose for all these years, but you could never stay put for long. So did you not let go? Give the future a chance. It doesn't have to be so scary. We can still be like we were so long ago-ACK!"

Ba'el pulled the witch closer just enough so that she had the room to pushed her back against the wall. I wasn't sure how much of the crack I heard was from the wall or the Crone.

"Go on then!" the Crone howled through the pain. "Finish it like the demon you are-"

I stood far enough away that I could not catch every nuance, but even I could see from the glint that Ba'el's red eyes had vanished. Her green goat-like ones had returned.

"No, Hilda," Ba'el said, missing the demonic murmur in her voice, "We were never the same. You were human, and I was the demon. I made you the way you are now hoping to see a human without chains. Could they ever stand on par with demons? Would demons ever see them as anything more? Those are the questions I spent centuries trying to answer. I could never be human, you're right. But no human could ever truly be a demon either. We'd have to meet in the middle. That's what I thought a long time ago. But then I learned there was no middle. All I managed to create was something twisted. I failed to answer my question. I was defeated. Disgraced. Then I was leashed and let loose upon humanity by a tyrant not even I could deny. I failed to learn what divide there is between a man and a demon... So I simply left everything behind... Then the world changed. I awoke one day, and I felt like a whole new perspective was opened to me. Perhaps there was a middle where I thought one never existed before. It took forty years and the last couple of days for me to figure out the answer to the question that has haunted me for thousands of years. It's funny. I had all the time in the world before now, but it was all just wasted years."

Ba'el lowered the Crone back down so that her feet could touch the floor.

the Crone's face softened, she poked and pleaded for answer, "A-and what did you figure out?"

"Not enough time, Hilda. I told you I have nothing left to teach you. Don't worry about it. You don't need to know the answer. Where we're going now, you won't need it, and it will better there than

what awaits us here.”

A lump formed in the Crone's throat, “W-what? You wouldn't. You couldn't! You'll destroy yourself. You can't kill me. You can't take my power away. Those were always part of the deal!”

“I would, and I can... There no future wherever you go. And it's about time for me to clean up the mess that I started. I hope you enjoyed yourself because this free ride is at its end... And if you really want to know what I learned, then you'll just have to figure it out on your own when you arrive at wherever twisted pieces of shit like yourself end up.”

The witch's face went pale, and tears fell freely from her eyes “...Why?”

“You've wasted countless years out of all these girls and boys you roped into your little fan-club," Ba'el raised a single finger from her paw, "You did it for yourself and for no other reason than that. You can't stand not being in control, so don't try to stand on the moral high ground and call me a demon that only takes," She lifted a second finger. "You twisted the lives of beings beyond recognition." She lifted her third and final finger. "You had a lot longer than I had to get things right, and you fouled it all up. You haven't grown or learned anything. And after what I've seen tonight, you never will," she stuck out her thumb. "But the biggest reason of them all... You made one mistake. Just one. You pissed me off.”

Ba'el's fingers curled up against her palm, and her thumb crossed those fingers while she cocked her arm back. Her fist became coated in the same green aura of flames that it was before. The Crone looked at it with vacant eyes, but she let out a scream when it rushed toward her at full force. I had to turn and look away. What I couldn't close was my ears. There was a wet thud and crack of stone, and the short lived shriek died. Then there were winds. Powerful scathing winds.

I opened my eyes and had to immediately shield my face. Where the Crone and Ba'el once stood together, there was now the demon and the outline of some headless form. There was no mess, but there was something torn in space where a head should be. It was empty, and it was pulling everything in toward it. The blackness of that space reminded me of that cold, living dark matter that made up abyssal energy. It must be abyssal energy. It wasn't exploding upon being released, like I would expect, it was collapsing in on itself.

The rest of the Crone's body did not stay for long; it was the first thing to collapse inward into the abyss. Swirls of dust and loose pebbles followed soon after. Ba'el stood her ground and started retreating backward a step at a time while shielding her face. Swirls of gray dust and black mist were being sucked into the empty sphere of

nothing like a vacuum cleaner. I could feel the winds rip past me, but I myself did not feel my body being pulled closer. A few rocks bounced painfully off my back as I dared to even see if I could approach closer.

It did not take long until the sphere reached critical mass and began to throb. The mountain itself seemed confused as a titanic battle was taking place between gravity, trying to bring the whole place down, and this anomaly, which threw a wrench into the very laws of nature itself. That was when the hole sprung to life and streaks of white lightning lashed out. A thousand whips raked across Ba'el and shocked her.

A scream died in her throat as an unfathomable amount of energy from some unknown place electrocuted her. I knew reality had broken down completely when she lit up like an x-ray; I saw her skeleton flash brightly as though her whole body was being broken down to base components and then promptly put back together as it resisted oblivion. A pale blue light shone from her head, and as the magic black hole finally started to die, Ba'el's physical form remained. It did let off smoke as it wavered on her hooves for a couple seconds until collapsing onto the floor.

That was the last the cavern could withstand. It simply could not tolerate the abuse anymore. A large chunk of the ceiling gave way in the distance and hit the ground with an earth-shattering bang. There was no time left, but I couldn't turn away from the demon sprawled out on the ground.

I found myself also asking, “Why?”

There was no self interest in what she did. Isn't that the core things that guides all demons? She also violated her contract and oath to the Crone. Was all that happened here punishment for that?

I caught myself running and dropping down next to the fallen demon. I didn't stop myself. My hand reached out for her forehead which was still glowing with a blue pentagram etched with light. It was warm. She was still warm. I couldn't feel a pulse, nor could I see her flat chest rise and fall. The ceiling was still coming down. If I didn't clear the cavern soon, I'd be crushed. But there was something keeping me here. A pang of guilt?

There was no way I'd let things end like this.

I still have questions. There's surely an apology I'm owed mixed in there somewhere too. But the image of a defenseless girl being buried alive within the heart of a mountain after everything she had said and done... That was the last straw.

It was an impulse that drove me. My reason and common sense washed their hands of it all.

She was small; she was light. I slid my hands underneath her and lifted her up. It was as awkward as trying to carry a sack of

potatoes, but I turned and ran all the same. The blue light shining from her forehead lit the way a bit, but almost every other light by either fire, magic, or something else was snuffed out by now. I ran and dodged the falling rocks and stepped and jumped over floor giving out. Surely my muscles would tear, but I had just a bit more adrenaline in me to keep going for a bit longer. I had some time, but how was I going to use it? The ceiling was blocked off. There was no other-

Wait... There was something... The handkerchief. There was a hole in the wall that lead to the outside!

I took a sharp turn and ran for the oaken doors leading into the Sabbath's living quarters. There was no doubt in my mind that the stone frame around those doors was warped, and they would not open, so I ran as fast as I could and threw all my weight into my shoulder. That door would break, or I would. When it cracked and easily blew off its hinges, I stumbled free at last from the cavern. It was a small victory but one desperately needed. It didn't even hurt-

I looked down at Ba'el still comatose in my arms. Her horns had a large plank of wood that was stuck on them...

"Whoops," I muttered, "I'll just leave this part out when I explain myself later... If there is a later."

The halls were empty. Only the ruins of belongings left behind and collapsed parts of the stonework littered what was once the heart of this witches' coven. The rumbling and cracking behind me woke me up and spurred me onward. Everything was dark. and I only had a few meters of very faint light to avoid tripping on anything, or worse, falling through the floor. The whole mountain was beginning to crumble inward from the center out toward the edges. I ran and squeezed through the tight spaces and leaped over everything strewn in my path. There was no time to think. There wasn't even a moment to try and get my bearings. I could only trust my gut and take the right path backwards toward the room we had all been teleported into the night before.

I could feel the ground sag behind me as the straight and narrow paths started to decline behind me. Thankfully, I reached the promised land. A pale white light shone ahead in the darkness that Ba'el's blue light tattoo had difficulty banishing on its own.

But it was still not much larger than it was before. There was crack had splintered out from the hole which ran down to the floor, but it was much too narrow. A small girl could maybe just barely crawl out, but looking at the horns on top of Ba'el's head killed that idea quickly. A mountain falling apart can make a man desperate enough. I kicked the wall with all my might while still holding Ba'el in my arms. I risked breaking my foot and perhaps my whole leg, but I didn't stop. There simply wasn't anything else I could do. My grunting became

increasingly hoarse as flakes of rock sheered off. That I could hear the few pieces of stone click and clack their way down the mountain on the other side drove me mad, and I kicked even harder.

The floor suddenly sunk about thirty centimeters. It was enough to cause my knees to buckle, but I managed to stop myself from collapsing even when carrying Ba'el's extra dead weight. The floor did act as a lever though. The hole in the wall crumbled and gave way. It was still night, and the full moon was actually bright enough after running through the pure darkness to sting my eyes... Maybe my eyes stung because they were tearing up.

I scrambled to the edge and looked down. It wasn't a sheer drop, but it was close enough. There was a cliff that reached down until the tree line. If hitting the rocks on the way down didn't do it, hitting those trees would make me a soft and squishy ball in a deadly game of Plinko. Still, my options were limited. Falling did not seem so bad as being crushed to death.

I couldn't princess carry Ba'el and try climbing at the same time, so I slung her tiny body over my shoulder. With one of her paws held tightly with my left, I kept my right hand free. It was then time for the leap of faith. I backed up toward the edge, my back facing the first fresh air for the longest time. There was no way for me to know if it was the crisp mountain air or the vertigo that was making my heart flutter. It could also be that I was dreading what pain my body was about to through and whether or not it could handle it.

I hopped backward, dropping down and caught the edge afterwards. My body screamed in pain for just the short moment in time when I grabbed hold of the edge with my free right hand. My feet desperately looked for anything to help hold my weight up before I tore a muscle or broke a bone in my arm. Then I hung there... I had no idea what to do next.

A mighty crack and roar signaled the start of another titanic shift of earth. I looked to my left and saw a large portion of the mountain crumble and fall backward. The opposite happened to my left as a portion of the mountain fell inwards. My fingers were slowly started to give way, but I couldn't even maneuver enough to look down and see where I was going. Then the solid stone I was holding onto gave way. Ba'el's unconscious body and I slipped free of the mountain and went airborne. I didn't even the time to reflect on how terrible this all was. My train of thought was full of nothing but the sound of rushing air and the sight of that hole in the wall getting further and further away... until we hit the rocks far below.

I expected my back to break like a twig, but it was a softer landing than I expected. The shock of impact still reverberated through me, but something absorbed it... It was Ba'el. I had landed on top of

her. I was sore and slow to act, but I saw that there was nothing out-of-place or bent in any wrong direction.

"Right. Immortal. Thanks. Forgot about that," I said in a daze.

We had fallen quite a few dozen meters down. It wasn't the treeline, it was at the bottom of the cliff just below that hole in the mountain... Which was actually getting... a bit closer now!

This whole side of the mountain was collapsing. The top half was falling inwards toward the center, but the bottom half was being pushed down and outward. There was a giant wave of rock crashing down like a wave of water. I looked around, and there was only a slight groove in the side of the mountain. The only thing I could do was wrap myself around Ba'el, press myself up tight against the stone and hold on for dear life. There was a slim hope it would let us dodge the falling rocks

The light of the moon and everything went dark.

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My head hurt. I could hardly breathe. The air was stagnant. But there was still light. It wasn't blue. I could still feel Ba'el's body heat, and the pentagram of light on her forehead was gone. The light I was seeing now was still pale moonlight. I hardly had any room to move; I had shoved myself further into the crevice in my panic than I had thought. At least I could move my whole body. I wriggled myself the best I could to set my feet free. A crack of breaking stones rewarded my efforts. An avalanche of rocks clacked off one another nearby. There was no room to stand, I had to grab hold of Ba'el and shimmy my way out of the closed space. Below us was giant slag of debris that had uprooted the forest below. There was only about a five meter drop down to it.

Above... well there was hardly much above. A good chunk of the mountain had fallen back in on itself. I could imagine this tall lone mountain was now an isolated caldera in the middle of nowhere with its guts exposed to the world... Had any more of it fallen outward instead of inward, Ba'el and I would have ended up buried and crushed anyways. It was one last stroke of good fortune.

Or perhaps not. Ba'el was still out like a light. She was still warm to the touch, but I couldn't tell if she was actually dead or not. She wasn't breathing, and she had no heartbeat. I hesitated to give CPR—I nearly had my skull broken last time doing it—but even when I did so, she still didn't stir awake. Yet, I couldn't conclude that she wasn't alive. Her body was still loose and limber. Ba'el had shown no fear falling from such a height before; I couldn't stop myself from thinking her body somehow operated differently.

She was in some kind of stasis.

My efforts to wake the demon were interrupted by aftershocks and the sound of the mountain still falling apart in the distance. There was still a lot of this mountain which could come crashing down. It was time to leave. I needed to get out of here before dawn.

Navigating through the debris and not tripping and tumbling to my certain death took time. The slew of rocks didn't look too stable. I pushed on regardless. My borrowed clothes were shredded. I was bleeding all over, and just moving agitated the scabs which had formed. There was a limp in my step even if I hadn't broken anything too badly to stop me from moving at all. My skin was completely gray; I had swallowed enough dust to make cement in my stomach and more than enough was in my lungs to keep me coughing for a week straight... I couldn't stop it even now.

No doubt my march was like that of the living dead. Most of my strength was in trying to carry Ba'el's lifeless body in my arms; the rest was just to keep myself from falling completely over. I wouldn't say I was walking. It was just an endless effort to postpone falling flat on my face.

Through the woods littered with fresh new stonework. I trekked down the foothills and nearer to a river which snaked across the land below me. Past an old base camp composed of an abandoned cabin. The river was the goal. That's what I said. I could die there if I had to. Right now, I just needed to keep going as the moon began to set, and the orange glow of the sun beneath the horizon told me this night was near its end.

My throat was parched, and the sound of the river's waters drew me in closer and closer. The mountain was far behind me now, and there was only one more rise in my way; beyond it was a bend in the river. It had to be that bend. If it wasn't, then that was the end. I would not have the strength to go on any further. I had been climbing down all this way, I only needed a little more strength to clear one small hill. My thighs and knees screamed in protest, but I forced myself onward.

As I crested the hill, I saw the clear calm water carrying some forest debris gently downstream. As my head appeared above the hill, I felt the warmth of the dawn sun on my back. Down below, I saw a silent collection of people waiting with gloomy looks on their faces. They sat under the shade of trees clinging to the river's edge and propped their backs up against them for some semblance of support. Not a word was spoken even though I'm sure there were many words to be had. My head eclipsed the light for just a moment, and the shadow danced quickly across the vision of some of those down below. Their heads slowly turned upward toward the hill, and they were greeted with my dour, beaten and bloody face.

I saw Rose's fiery tail spark and flutter as she stood upright immediately. Shoshanah was kneeling amongst the children; her paws rushed to her face, and she barely held back a noise that was about to escape her lips. Chris turned around and heaved a sigh of relief before standing at attention and saluting. Minte... I barely caught her out of the corner of my eye at the edge of everyone gathered together; she actually had a smile on her face.

When I stood upon the top of the hill their expressions changed. They saw I was carrying Ba'el in my arms. It was the children this time whose faces lit up. I heard a few quiet hushed voices call out Isabelle. I was surprised they would see fit to call her that. There was no fanfare. Not enough energy remained for celebration. All there was, was a cathartic release.

And the sound of water crashing.

I knew not where it came from; but following the direction, Minte's antenna swung to pointed me downriver. A splash of water, rhythmic and monotonous. A quieter, but distinct and escalating, sound of trodden wood and clanking iron. From behind the river bend came a boat. A river boat powered by a paddle wheel in the rear. A black chimney spewed a queer green smoke into the air that dissolved completely into the air unlike smoke from a fire... Or soot from coal.

It was a riverboat. Just as large as one too. What was it doing out here though? At this place at this time?... I think I already knew, but I refused to acknowledge it without proof.

The riverboat quickly pulled up on the shore, and the men and women running about on its decks were scurrying to drop anchor and lower the gangplank. It happened quickly and professionally. A whole platoon of men and women armed head to toe marched double time and fanned out to secure the shore. They huddled around one person in particular.

The girls readied themselves, but their movements were understandably slow. There was nowhere to run anyways. Meanwhile, I plodded down the hill and into the camp with the others as the troop of knights, adorned and ready for war, surrounded us all.

"...Grand Cardinal Ulmpher..." I growled.

A trio of knights split apart. One with blond hair I remember from before. He had an irritating, handsome face complete with smug smile and overall punchable face. The one who came out was an older woman with bluish-gray, and piecing baby-blue eyes, yet she hardly a wrinkle on her. Her pure white robes embroidered with vibrant golds and reds oozed wealth and importance, yet she seemed not to care at all about the mud and dirt coating them as she approached.

"Mr. Laven," She greeted me while daring to step beyond her entourage, "Well done. I only dared to hope for such results in my

wildest daydreams.”

Her old tired face graced me with a smile that chilled my blood.

“I shall take over everything from here.”

Chapter 83

Dawn had arrived, but the night had yet to end. Birds sang in the distance to welcome the morning but not here. Not now.

Surrounding us and the orphans were dozens of men and women adorned in full-plate armor. We had come to the river in order to escape the collapsing mountain behind us, but we were still stuck between a rock and a hard place. Their polished iron shone like silver and reflected the early red dawn sun. They had yet to draw their swords, but not a single hand strayed far from a hilt. Positioned on the riverboat were also an array of archers anchored to the deck in mail tunics. Each had a longbow in hand; and although not drawn, arrows were notched. Watching silently in the rear between them were robed men running rosary beads through their fingers as their lips quietly spoke prayers. An exorcism of sorts. Perhaps to ward off evil spirits or malicious spellcraft.

Standing at the tip of the wedge was the oldest and most colorfully dressed of them all. Red dyes and gold embroidery were interwoven on her pure white robes. It screamed her identity from the rooftops. She was one of the most powerful leaders within the whole Empire. One of the nine, the Grand Cardinal Ulmpher.

There wasn't much we could do as the wedge split off into a semicircle which then completely encircled us. I kept my eyes steady on the old woman and her youthful pale blue eyes.

"I had my doubts that you could manage such a feat, but I humbly bow to your cunning and perseverance," she said with genuine praise, "Time was short, and my list of capable agents was much too small. My trust in them was not concrete."

"And your trust in me was?" I growled.

She seemed either ignorant or cared little for how defensive I was.

"Yes. I could see it in your eyes. You would stay true to the mission, and you would do everything you could against this Pale Moon Sabbath. Their crimes are long and profoundly against your own sensibilities. Was I mistaken?"

I said nothing. She chuckled softly, once.

"I will admit that I had once considered your unorthodox means, but as I said, I lacked a willing candidate, and one which could be vetted."

I narrowed my bloodied and swollen eyes at the Grand Cardinal, and she responded in kind by elaborating.

"Capable, skilled, trained... Willing to be castrated and cleared with minimal risk of contamination and metamorphosis into a monster-"

Was I hearing things right? What she just said was horrifying. But she wasn't done yet.

"-I knew of no man in my employ. It would be necessary to do all of this just for the slightest chance it may fool them. I knew of no one suitable for such a role. But you?... Like a blank slate. They'd detect nothing wrong until they got a good look at you with their own eyes. But it would be too late."

Yeah. That's about how it went. Is that why she gave us such a broad blank check to do with her authority as we saw fit?

She smiled again, and my blood chilled as she spoke, "Since you have succeeded so marvellously, I believe it is time to now lift that weight off your shoulders and see to your reward."

My voice was hoarse, parched and rough as I interjected, "the Crone is dead. She's gone. I saw it happen. What's left of the mountain behind me is proof of that. Her witches have scattered to the four winds, and I doubt they will be causing you headaches anytime soon."

Ulmpher's voice became stern, "That is not what I'm speaking about, Mr. Laven."

I paused. My eyes followed her eyes down to the girl I was carrying in my arms. I looked back up, startled.

"What?"

"No matter how powerful a witch may be, the most valuable prize is always the demon who lingers in the shadows," Ulmpher said matter of factually.

Something Shoshanah had said came back to me:

The Sabbath is a group of like-minded humans, mortals, seeking the power which demons possess. Magic powers, knowledge, beauty, strength... certain.... favors.

"Witches exist on borrowed power. They are agents of more sinister forces that reside on the fringes of our Creator's domain. There is no prize greater than the demon herself, the true leader of the Pale Moon Sabbath."

I could not stay quiet, "There is no more Pale Moon Sabbath! It was destroyed. Not even by us. It was because of this girl right here!"

I raised Ba'el's unconscious body slightly and lowered her back down. Ulmpher raised an eyebrow and looked at me suspiciously. The smile had been wiped off her face.

"Abdren."

The handsome blond paladin stepped forward and saluted by pounding his fist against the plate covering his chest.

"Yes, your holiness."

"Have your men collect the demon."

Abdren's eyes slithered their way over to me, and a scummy smile spread across his face.

"At once, your holiness," he said, unable to hide his enjoyment as he looked at my bloodied form, "Well, congratulations you-"

"Stop fooling around and get on with it," Ulmpher shouted, becoming visibly impatient.

The paladin nearly choked on his tongue. His face scrunched up for a moment as he swallowed his pride, but he quickly carried on. He waved his hand which caused the two with him to spring back to life. They produced some serious looking manacles from their rucksacks. Each cast iron ring and chains was inscrolled with gold and silver runes beyond my understanding. The manacles were thick, more welcome to mooring that boat of theirs than a person. The aura given off by them gave me the impression that they had been created for solely for this type of prisoner. My intuition was that they would not break due to physical strength or any meddling magic.

I heard Ba'el's voice in my head, clear as day.

Where we're going now, you won't need it, and it will better there than what awaits us here.

As they approached, I took a step backward. A cascade of steel clanked as everyone immediately reached for their weapons and readied their missiles. I could hear the girls behind me shift and ready themselves as well. No one went any further than that. Everyone froze in place. Even Abdren and his two lieutenants stopped. Only Ulmpher dared move. All she did was heave her shoulders and sigh.

"Mr. Laven... I presumed you were smarter than this."

"You said you wanted proof that the Sabbath has been uprooted! You wanted its leader dead or alive. I already told you the proof is in the ruins of that mountain. The Crone is gone, and her Sabbath is disbanded... This isn't part of the deal!"

"I feared this might be the case," Ulmpher said, her voice now becoming irritated, disappointed. "It is a tragedy that such a kind soul could have sympathy for the devil."

I grit my teeth and seethed, "And you need to pay attention. This girl isn't the leader of the Sabbath you were after. This girl isn't part of our deal!"

"She is Laven... Remember this: Not once did I ever say the leader of the Pale Moon was the Crone. The capture of that petulant child was never my goal."

Those words grabbed hold of my heart and crushed it, twisted it.

Ulmpher took a step forward, and she continued, "I've known for quite some time the name of the demon behind that ancient witch.

Humans such as you or I can not speak her name any further than 'Ba'el'."

My heart skipped a beat.

"I have hunted demons for years. Ever since I assisted my old mentor when I was but a young girl. I know that goat horned girl in your arms is her. Many a tome I have read are written about her kind. So many references within all those annals. So many pages making up an extensive library of demonology. For thirty years I've hunted this particular demon. Many sacrifices have been made for this day. It would be a shame that you and your friends became one more when you needn't be."

Sacrifices? Then ever since- That would also mean- No!

My eyes shot open wide. My teeth clattered together in anger, and the icy cold grip around my heart burst into a violent flame of anger. I bared my fangs and glared at the Grand Cardinal in rage.

"Yes. I've known this demon has hid herself as a child for decades. Oh, how I wished there was an easier answer to root her out. To think that she could dwell on most hollowed ground and not even begin to smoke... The thought causes my skin to crawl. But I am smart enough to not underestimate a demon far more ancient and wise than I. Had she caught even the slimmest hint that we knew the general area she hid and were ruthlessly straining through every child for her, we would lose her trail completely."

"You-!" I roared and was ready to charge and lash out, but the clatter steel in their scabbards stopped me dead in my tracks.

"Yes. I knew of the gathering sacrifices. I also knew what they were for. I welcomed it. The Crone would do the business of dragging the demon out of hiding for me. Then we would use that chance to spring a trap."

Shoshanah barked from behind me, "You'd dare-?"

"Silence, heretic!" Ulmpher yelled over her.

I could hear all the girls stir behind me which caused every knight to draw their swords at once. The sound of bowstrings being drawn played like string instruments from the riverboat, and the throat chanting from the robed men got louder. Everyone froze in place. It was the next stage of the standoff.

Ulmpher voiced reality, "Divine steel. Immune to the protections abyssal energy provides. I have spent a great deal of time, funds and influence gathering so much in one place."

The old woman traced a bony and slender finger over the edge of one silver coated sword held up by one of her paladins.

"Cold iron arrowheads. Made from the star stone gathered by the sorcerer-monks of the Rwekli tundra wastes. Celestial metal called down from our Lord's own heavens; cratering the land, pulled

from the earth and then hammered over an enchanted anvil made of ice that has existed since ancient times. I know few pieces of armor that can resist a direct hit."

The Grand Cardinal gestured over to the boat where each archer held such black glinting arrowheads with shafts attached to rope. They would serve as harpoons... She might yell the others down, but I still could not contain my anger.

"You used all those- all these girls here as bait!"

Ulmpher was perfectly calm when she replied, "No, Laven.... An Empire is built on the backs of the peasantry, organized by the minds of countless scribes, protected with the arms of soldiers whose numbers are legion, guided by generations of wisdom from the devout-," she turned and looked at me with sorrowful eyes, "watered with the blood of martyrs... Yes, even children. Man or woman, it does not matter. Every subject of the Empire has a duty toward it. The lifeblood of the Empire is also their own. They bleed for it, just as others bleed for them. Neither could survive without the other. Such it was written, so it is the will of our Lord, The Almighty. It was by his will that they have served the greater good of us all."

My breathing had become heavy, and my face had developed a nervous tic. I was consumed by so much rage to hear something so viciously callous. To hear something that dehumanized so many innocents. It was a disgusting justification. Ulmpher took another step forward, and she stood beside her frozen paladin guard who watched me with cold eyes and hands ready to draw even colder steel.

"And now they're safe. What are you going to do about that?" I hissed.

"Quarantine," she said so plainly it hurt, "Corrupt energies that fuel a witch's magic are no different from the stuff that powers demons. A demonic mana that stains and can never be removed. Each one is a walking powder keg and a possible threat to humanity. All it could take it one little spark."

My eyes went bloodshot red, and I bit down on my lip so hard that it bled.

"I am not a monster, Laven. I shall hold them away where they can pray for their mortal souls until they grow old and die... And also help us further understand that energy festering in the shadows of their soul. After all, you must know your enemy."

She turned her nose up toward me and gave me a look you would a dog gnashing and snapping at his leash, foaming at the mouth and crazy.

"Truly, you are a tragic man, Mr. Laven. You should choose your friends with much more care. If you knew everything I have read, you would certainly not stomach holding that girl so closely as you are

now."

Words spilled out of my mouth, "And you haven't seen what I've seen. This demon is like this because she did it to herself. What kind of demon harms herself? Especially in a way that doesn't benefit her!"

"The clever kind, Mr. Laven. Their whole misbegotten race is built upon deceit. They are an existence which only serves to shadow the truth of our Lord. The Almighty gives us life, the light and warmth of a soul-"

"Do you realize what your games almost released on this place? We stopped the Crone's spell, we AND the demon. The whole of March would have fallen into chaos and delivered right into that witch's hands. And YOU almost let it happen!"

She ignored me and continued without skipping a beat, "-Men pray. Demons make them prey. That is how it has been. It will be that way into posterity, so hand the demon over to me. I will show you the beast she becomes when her bluff is seen through. The ugly form she shows you as she protests the chains which will rightfully bind her wickedness. Her crimes against humanity that have been a blight on this world for thousands of years will meet their ultimate consequence."

She took another step beyond her guard. They looked ready to protest, but they dared not speak up while she spoke.

"Hand the demon over, Laven."

"You want to parade her through the streets of Rome," I snarled. "You'd sacrifice thousands of lives for that? For your own ego?"

The literal meaning of my words was lost on her, but she understood well enough.

"When I bring this demon to the capital, and I carry her up to the Lord's Golden Hill, not even Grand Cardinal Ol'een and his allies will deny that the title of Matriarch belongs to me alone. You would not wish the Holy See to be controlled by Ol'een. Not even to see it released upon your worst enemy, Mr. Laven. You and your kind. Your monster sympathizing and consorting kind... Every monster will be the target of his wrath. I offer a better alternative. Not one steeped in mutually assured destruction through fruitless ideological crusades. I warned you of this before. This is my last chance to undo everything he has already accomplished. My actions will save a million lives for every life harmed or ended doing their service toward the Empire future... Now hand over my prize."

I did this, didn't I? This was Ulmpher's plan all along. Did Ba'el know? If she did, what she said earlier made sense. All her actions made sense... I went against that. She'll be put in chains and given a fate worse than hell and death put together. It would be on my head... I

just wanted to help. Rose said those two wanted to come to an understanding. If that's so, then Ba'el destroying that witch must have hurt her. Not just physically, but mentally and spiritually. Now she'd get worse, and it would be all my fault.

I watched what she did. I'm sure I have an idea why she did it. She didn't want that end, but she saw no other alternative. No other alternative than what was about to happen. It would be all my fault... I just wanted to help. It was in my power to reverse just one wrong. It seemed as though I had been dancing unwittingly in this old woman's hand all this time.

"Hand the demon over, Laven," the Grand Cardinal demanded.

I refused to budge. I simply wouldn't; I couldn't, even if she was a demon. Not after everything she has done... I believe there was something more too it. There was no way I could hand her over. Not after risking my life to do so. Not in good conscious and knowing what will become of her.

"If you insist on being difficult, and continue to refuse holding up your end of the bargain, we will have to settle this with force. I took great personal risks consorting with someone such as you. I did so as a sign of good faith. Perhaps I was mistaken that there can be some semblance of cooperation between the Empire and monster kind... You should know I take no risks in disposing of you and your concubines."

I could feel strength leave my body. My heart might have stopped beating, and I had to think through every slow and methodical breath I took. There was no doubt in my mind that my face had lost all its color.

"You are all battered, beaten and bruised. You cannot win this fight. Hand over the demon and save yourselves-"

My eyes slowly closed, and I swallowed hard.

"-the four of you are outnumbered, surrounded and outclassed."

I felt everything come back to me instantly. My eyes opened, and I laid them on Ulmpher. The look on my face concerned her guards who gripped their swords tighter and looked ready to charge forward and run me through if I so much as moved a muscle.

"Well? What shall it be? This is the last time I will ask."

The four of us? Not counting the demon... Myself, Rose, Shoshanah, Chris and-

I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from spreading ear from ear. I turned my head and refocused my eyes right into Ulmpher's own. I laughed; I couldn't stop laughing. It was a chuckle at first, but it grew more and more maniacal until I had lost all control. The laughter

belting out of me was as laugh as my lungs could handle.

She looked at me as though I had become a madman. I looked into those tired eyes of hers that had ceased to take me seriously. Her hand slowly raised into the air to drop back down and give the signal to attack.

I went from laughing uncontrollably to dead serious in an instant, “I don't think so.”

The only sound was that of rustling leaves. Anyone would chalk it up to the breeze, but a green shadow dropped down from the foliage above. It landed softly and without sound behind Grand Cardinal Ulmpher. The shadow grabbed hold of the old woman's raised hand, twisted behind her back and spun her around. One snikt later and there was a curved blade pressed against her throat.

When her soldiers were startled and ready to attack I bellowed, “Not so fast!”

Abdren's face was full of fright, and he took a couple steps forward, but only to have Minte readjust her captive between them. He stopped in his tracks; the paladin's wide-eyed expression narrowed into a scowl.

“Unhand her, you beast, or else!”

He held out his sword's point toward me and raised his other hand up high. With the drop of his hand, the way his master had done so before, all those soldiers would open fire at once. The old woman's voice squeaked out for just a second before Minte silenced her by pressing the edge of her arm-blade harder against her throat.

If she planned on telling everyone to take the shot anyways, it wasn't going to happen... Neither would Minte kill the Grand Cardinal. But Abdren did not know that.

“Sheathe your swords,” I commanded.

No one budged. Not a single soldier put away their weapon, but they didn't take a step forward either.

“No...” One of the soldier's voices spoke up, “That's the Green Reaper!”

Every soldier did a double take. When Abdren took another look at Minte, even he seemed to understand what that meant. Most spoke in hushed tones that they didn't think she actually existed at all. That she was just a rumor or a fairy tale.

His breathing became erratic and sweat pooled on his forehead, “That's not possible. Her holiness told me that she was dead...”

I grinned. Ulmpher's eyes bulged out of her head and gurgles came out of her mouth from the back of her throat. I would love to hear what she had to say, but now wasn't the time.

“I won't say it again... Abdren. Sheathe. Your. Swords.”

He snarled and remained stubborn.

“Go ahead . But know that the Grand Cardinal will die before your hand makes it halfway down. I shouldn't have to tell you how fast this girl is. You and your men might do some serious damage. Hell, I'll give it to you that you'll win... But after your holiness dies, since you're so very front and center, I give you three seconds to live. Tops.”

I watched Abdren's teeth chatter. He couldn't hide it. His eyes turned to me, then back to Ulmpher. He would be nothing without her. This paladin wasn't the kind of man who sets his own agenda. He was the kind of man who serves well riding on the coattails of others. A stooge, and nothing more. It wasn't surprising to me when he slowly crossed that sword of his over his chest and let it slide back into his scabbard. He glared at me with hate in his eyes, but that still didn't stop the rest of his body from shaking. After he put away his sword, the others followed. Archers in the rear relaxed their bows, and the robed men went silent.

“Back on your boat,” I said.

I spun around slowly and looked behind me for the first time. Rose still had her sword drawn, she looked back at me with an anxious expression that looked troubled. Chris and Shoshanah were still frozen in place among the children. All the girls gathered on the grass, dirty, bloodied, crying and terrified, dared not move.

“The girls stay. Every. Last. One of you. Get back on your boat.... GO!”

No one moved for about three seconds, but they all started to back up and retreat. Their circle around us regressed back into a semicircle, then columns as they slunk back toward the riverboat still moored on the river's shore. We followed them as they did so, and when Abdren stood at the top of the gangplank, he yelled back down.

“We've done as you ask. Now return the Grand Cardinal to us.”

I snapped back, “When your boat runs aground downstream, you can double time you asses back this way and find her.”

The girls and I all seemed to be on the same page. Rose used her sword to cut the anchor free, Chris balanced on her tail like a kangaroo and kicked the boat loose from the shore while Shoshanah scrounged up enough stamina to cast a spell to slam the riverboat's rear paddle with a kinetic blast from her staff. The crew and soldiers on board panicked when their boat drifted back into the river and carried away down stream. Without a paddle to work against the current, nor a way to steer, they would drift for some time. They'd go around the bend and continue until hitting a sandbar, the opposite shore or something.

But that still meant time was short.

I turned to Chris and ordered, “Hold onto the girl for now.”

The wyvern held out her wings and supported the demon easily as though the leather membranes to them were a hammock. She was about to say something but took one look at my face, and she held back. A look in her eyes told me she was conflicted, perhaps saddened by just looking at me right now. I'd hear a lecture on my behavior later. Right now I was fuming inside, and it manifested in cold and methodical action.

I turned around and looked at Ulmpher. Her professionalism was gone. She tried to glare at me with a brave face, but her eyebrows were too high, and her teeth were clenched in a very telling way. I walked toward her and along the way I pulled a dagger free from Rose's bandoleer. The salamander wanted to say something as well, but words failed her too. When I got closer to the Grand Cardinal, Minte had already taken some rope she had prepared from somewhere and tied both of Ulmpher's hands behind her back.

The knife twirled through my fingers as I held it upward, then downward. My other hand grabbed hold of her robe's fabric at the shoulder, and I ripped a large portion of her sleeve off. I then spun the knife around in my hand again and then tossed it back toward Rose who caught it with no fret at all.

With the strip of cloth in my hand, that cost more than it did to feed a single mouth for a year, I wrapped it around the old woman's eyes. I walked around behind her, Minte stepped away for me, so I could then seize her by the knot that tied her hands. The old woman gasped for air when the assassin's blade was withdrawn; but even then, she dared not speak. Not yet. It wouldn't do her any good, and she knew it. Perhaps she was still busy trying to understand where things had gone wrong. Where did she miss some clue or hint that could have prevented this? That wasn't for me to decide. For now, I was going to push my advantage and settle some business... And an old score.

“Laven?” Shoshanah spoke up at last, “What precisely do you intend to do?”

I took a deep breath, turned toward the anubis and answered straightforwardly, “The two of us are going to have a chat. In private.”

Since her arms were tied up, and she had no more strength than any old woman, it was easy for me to push Ulmpher along.

I shouted back one last thing before leaving the camp, “Watch the girls and be ready to leave when I get back. Give me fifteen.”

***

Two people walked through the early morning woods, the dew clung to the grass, and the birds sang in reveille in ignorance of what was happening below them. The sound of the river below, the breeze through the leaves were tempered by the trodding of their feet through the mud and dirt. Despite the peaceful and pleasant sounds and untouched beauty of nature, the look of the two marching through the forest was a blight onto the serenity of this place.

The tall man had a face bruised, bloodied and covered in muck. His brown hair was mangled and wild; his face was twisted into a frown with sapphire blue eyes that spat venom and withered anything subject to their gaze. Dirty and mangy clothes that didn't quite fit clung desperately to his body. The elderly woman he was pushing further into the forest was helplessly tied up with her arms behind her back. She was the man's complete opposite, trappings of the rich and the powerful billowed off her. But it all merely status and no substance. Her title of Grand Cardinal had no meaning when she was unable to resist the man who had her arms twisted behind her back and a strip of clothed tied around her eyes.

"Think very carefully about what you are doing, Laven." She warned the man behind her.

"Already have," Laven replied.

He shoved her forward when she tried to stop and protest, but the man pulled her back up when she nearly fell forward onto her face.

Laven pushed the defenseless old woman through the woods until, after minutes of marching, they reached their final destination. Up the hill, with the river nestled snugly below them through the maze of trees, was a clearing where an old cabin had been built and forgotten. Rotten piles of firewood were piled in a heap by the side. Moss, vines and plants crawled over the old wooden planks, and the trees and shrubbery had almost clawed their way back to reclaim the plot of land. It had been decades since anything human had set foot here. This is where the man led the old woman.

The man pushed the old woman down against an old tree stump. She did not see it coming, but she did not make a sound other than a pained grunt. His fierce piercing eyes watched her long enough to make sure that she hadn't broken anything or made any attempt to run away before he turned and walked toward the crumbling cabin.

Ulmpher, the Grand Cardinal, could not see, but she could hear his footsteps move away. The thought of running crossed her mind; but without her hands or the ability to see, she would only hurt herself. Dignity was something that she was still clinging to, even if the day had quickly gotten away from her. She could not stomach the thought of showing her back right now. Even if her title and status meant nothing right now, it was who she was. It was powerless right now, but it had

meaning and power outside of this infinitesimally small corner of the world. She drew what little comfort she could from that.

There would be consequences.

But there was someone who did not seem fazed by that at all. Laven emerged from the cabin, carrying something in one hand and dragging something with the other. Ulmpher could only hear the sound of two sticks dragging through the dirt. It was the legs of a chair she could not see. What she could not sense or foresee, was the length of rope in his other hand.

He set the chair in front of her, and she understood what the man's intent was when she did not hear it creak and be used as a seat. Her heartbeat thumped painfully, and her mind raced for any vague hope or tactic she could use to stall the man. Surely Abdren would not give up so easily and would return soon.

"What did you do to her?"

Laven raised his head up, "To whom?"

"...The Green Reaper."

Even she could not believe the words coming out of her mouth.

"She has a name... It's Minte."

Ulmpher's jaw rattled on reflex. Of course she knew that. She had had access to those records. What she couldn't understand is how he knew that. A lump caught in her throat when she swallowed hard. She had not underestimated the demon, but perhaps she had underestimated the man. He was not even done yet. Laven spoke as his hands worked with the hemp rope.

"Just a poor girl living a simple happy life. A poor girl other people couldn't leave alone. Not even when she lost everything. The Church had plans for her after that, oh, yes they did. What was his name? Father Ciel?"

Ulmpher body chilled. Just as she was getting her heart rate back under control, he spilled a name he couldn't possibly know.

"I think that's right," Laven mused, "Ol'een has been continuing his research. Well, at the very least he has taken advantage of it."

Ulmpher spoke up, trying to demand answers, "Where did you-?"

"-Minte told me."

There's no way she could. That was the thought that went through her mind.

"Well, maybe not with words, but she showed me all the same."

Laven's hands continued to fumble as he made a knot but would suddenly unmake it and grimace in annoyance with each failure.

"That's... Impossible," She moaned.

“That I broke that little spell of yours? Almost died doing it, but here I am... You have your secrets, and I have mine. It was a little hectic back then, but let me just say it now, 'Surprise!'”

Laven cracked a length of rope in his hands, the sound of it caused the old woman to be startle and jump a little.

“Can't believe I forgot you didn't even know,” He said with a smile on his face, “I guess I was right. It was safe to assume Ol'een lied to you all about losing one of his best agents. It would show weakness. Too bad I didn't trust you with that tidbit of information. But hey! It's why I'm standing here, and you're like that. That's a real shame. I guess he's still able to muddle up your plans without even trying.”

The Grand Cardinal grit her teeth hard enough that she almost risked cracking them.

“Don't be a fool, Laven! You still have the chance to undo all of this. We can take the demon, and I can overtake that tyrant at a run while he jogs to victory!”

“Oh? So now it's 'we'?”

“Enough games!” She yelled; her raspy old woman's voice becoming gravelly, “There's a great deal at risk here. It's all in your hands right now!”

“I'm not responsible for a million other decisions before my own. The only thing I'm responsible for is doing what I see is right. What I'm not going to do is hand over Ba'el to the likes of you. She saved my life, all those girls lives and quite possibly the lives of everyone around here... If you don't want to believe that, so be it. That doesn't change the fact that I'm not handing her over. And I'm not handing over the girls either.”

“And what? What do you think you can-”

“I already got a good idea. Maybe not the best idea, but one I can probably live with... But you and I... I think we're at an impasse. Easy enough to solve. You just need to be taught where the two of us stand.”

Laven pulled the two ends of the rope together once more, and it snugly snapped into place. A perfect loop at one end and a coil of rope above it. Ulmpher could not see it, nor had she yet to even sense or imagine it. He had struggled to remember how to tie one, but he held a noose in his hands. The man got up out of the chair and walked behind her.

“Get up,” he said, the faux pleasantness in his voice long gone.

He grabbed the old woman by the knot trying her hands together and lifted her up.

“On the chair,” he ordered while pushing her toward the lone

chair.

The chair hit her in the shins, but with Laven's incessant and rough pushing and prodding, she struggled and stood on top of it. While the woman stood there still dazed and confused, Laven twirled the noose like a lasso and threw it up and over a solid branch high above her. He lowered it down slowly, cautiously and dropped the loop down over her head and then yanked it back up so that it would close around her neck. It was only then that the feeling of rope against her neck brought her wandering and scattered mind back to reality.

"You wouldn't!" She screamed.

"I would," Laven casually said while tying the other free end of the rope securely so there would be no more slack.

"There's no crime more serious than what you're doing now. You'll not find a corner of this whole world where you'd be safe! The other eight and my successor will hunt you and your whores down from one end of the world to the other! Don't play me for a fool and try to bluff your way-"

Crack! Laven kicked one of the four chair legs out from under Ulmpher. The chair rocked back and forth as she nearly lost her balance, and the chair nearly broke underneath her completely. She coughed and gagged while the noose around her neck tightened.

"I would," Laven menaced, "It seems no matter where I go, people like you keep getting in my way anyways. "You people ever think for a moment that I just want to be left alone? I got places to go, people to see. I got my own problems and a mystery to solve. I'm fucking sick and tired of everyone trying to rope me into their games... I probably am a fool. I can't just leave someone in trouble without doing anything, and I couldn't pass by without helping if I can. What I don't recall is ever doing anything directly against people like you... Now, here's the deal. You leave me and the girls the hell alone."

Ulmpher gagged, but managed to just barely speak with the rope cutting into her throat.

"I do not.... negotiate... with villains and heretics... such as... YOU!"

Laven sighed and nodded to himself. Then kicked another chair leg out from under her. With only two legs to stand on, she nearly lost balance completely. It wobbled back and forth, and the old woman struggled to keep it steady. She dropped down just a bit further. While she could still just barely breathe, she could now hardly speak at all, and only gurgles come out of her mouth.

"Now listen close. This is where the two of us stand. Give me a reason... Just one good reason... You refuse to leave these girls alone? I'll be back. You, yes. You, Grand Cardinal Ulmpher. If you want to dedicate your time and money to keep me from going south...

Hell... If you, or your allies, harm ANY of my friends. Any. Single. One of them... I know a certain girl. I've tried not to think about it... But I think she fancies me. Give me just one good reason and I'll march my ass back up North. I'll give her a ring to replace the one she broke, and then I'll put the idea in her head to take back the lands that rightfully belonged to Domdracveria in ancient times..."

Laven's voice grew deep, dark and sinister.

"I'll dedicate the rest of my life to see the entire North rises up and makes your entire precious Empire burn... How does that sound for a crusade of mutually assured destruction?"

Ulmpher continued to sway, her eyes bulging out underneath her blindfold as she tried to stop herself from choking on her tongue before the noose did it for her.

"Well?" Laven said as he put his foot on one of the last two chair legs.

The woman nodded her head to show she understood. Laven lifted the sole of his shoe off the chair and backed away.

"I'm glad we could settle this without bloodshed."

The man turned around and made his way back to the trail they had taken toward the cabin. The woman groaned and tried to call out after him when she could hear him walking away and leaving her there to hang.

"Your men will come back and find you soon enough. Just try to keep up that balance until they do... Your life depends on it," he said with a sardonic tone of voice as he saluted, "May we never meet again, Miss Ulmpher."

Laven disappeared into the forest and back toward the river. He left the old woman there to balance for her life.

Chapter 83.5

Three days of marching. Three long arduous and silent days of trekking through the wilderness. Off the beaten path, away from the civilized lands of man and into the waiting maw of monster kind. On the fringes of The Marches, in the shadow of the mountain range which encloses it off from the rest of the world, sits a grassy hinterland. I savored the peace and quiet of the land which was oh so different from the death march we had just ended. Underneath a lone tree crowning a small hill and overlooking a quaint village, I finally had my long awaited moment of rest.

The feel of my old blue jeans and shirt, the comforting feeling of my worn in leather jerkin, gloves and boots, each one soothed me. I felt as though I could fall into a sleep like Rip Van Winkle at any moment. But then I would miss everything I had worked toward. Below me all the girls we had rescued were gathered. Near them, Shoshanah was discussing something just out of earshot with the village elder. A very tall woman. With bodybuilder muscles, short boy's cut hair and a dirt stained but southern belle farmer girl's face... And that's about where the human stopped. She had digitigrade, bovine legs from the waist down covered in shaggy brown fur. She stood on a pair of massive hooves with thick iron horse shoes underneath. A pair of massive bovine horns protruded out of her head, just like a bull's. She stood there, a good couple heads taller than Shoshanah, with her arms crossed over her chest while listening to our plea. I hoped against hope they would agree.

That minotaur woman was not alone; a pair of other women—who looked like twins—with insectoid features like those of a wasp stood guard beside her with iron tipped pikes at ease. They had human silhouettes but came complete with bright yellow and black abdomens which jutted out from their backsides, each tipped with a wicked dagger-like stinger. Their arms and legs were encased in long chitinous boots and gloves, and a pair of thin membrane wings stuck out of their shoulder blades. Those girls also had two smaller pairs of hands sprouting from their sides, currently crossed over their stomachs, while antenna and pairs of compound eyes protruded from their long black hair.

Behind them were all manner of monster from those with traits from cow to sheep so on and so forth. I spotted a few men and boys here and there too. It was a ranch we had sniffed out far away from the turmoil that ravaged the rest of The Marches. Some would call it a demon realm; but after seeing one for myself back up north, I would call that an absurd notion. This place was peaceful and kind. If these girls couldn't go back to the abbey or anywhere else that the Church

has power, this was the best we could do for them... Although I still wasn't sure it was for the best.

Minte and Chris were busy keeping the girls herded together and safe. They had been around those two for long enough to know they were harmless. Some had already opened up to them a bit. It was easy for Chris who could act just like a child at times. Some thought Minte looked really cool and mature. I could tell from the way her antenna spun about that she was actually overwhelmed and embarrassed with all the attention. She wasn't used to being seen, let along have kids pull at her and wanting to play.

My eyes turned toward Ba'el. She had awoken after the second day. The girl couldn't move very well though. We had to keep carrying her for a whole day until she could wobble and slowly walk on her own. It was as though her muscles had suffered a couple years worth of atrophy. I guessed, and she confirmed, that it had to do with the punishment she received for breaking her contract. How did she not die from it? That she refused to answer. Maybe she didn't know? She certainly didn't say anything more about well... anything. Ba'el was keeping rather uncharacteristically quiet and reserved about it. Even now Feena, Gloria and Heather were surrounding and overwhelming her with questions and attention... The look on the demon's face told me she was ready to freak out at any moment. Especially with Heather who kept pulling on her tail and laughing.

Did she end up really finding that answer she was looking for? I was curious... Maybe I saved the demon because I wanted to hear it from her... Nah, I wish I were that enigmatic. It's probably because I'm a putz who couldn't stand the thought of what would happen to that girl if I didn't stand up for her... Saving her meant I had robbed that Grand Cardinal of her prize. That had to sting. I wouldn't be surprised if she tried again. Would the demon be strong enough by then? Would this place be safe with her in it? I had made some pretty crazy threats in the heat of the moment. Maybe she would be safe for just a little while. Dammit, the more I thought the more unsure I became.

"Was it worth it?" I asked out loud to myself.

I shouldn't mince words: I completely lost it a few days ago. There were a lot of emotions that boiled over, and I may have taken things too far. This end may be what I wanted, maybe not, but the means still left a bad taste in my mouth. Threatening to lynch old ladies, no matter how powerful they are, may undermine my moral authority. Had I gone too far?

A familiar voice stirred me from my nap, "If you went through with it, we woulda' heard from them again by now."

Rose had pulled herself from the chaos below and made her way over to my tree. A few comforting words was her gift to me.

“Heya,” she said as she poked her head out from behind the tree.

“Hey,” I replied, half asleep.

She sat herself down right next to me without even asking. I shouldn't be surprised about that. She lacked at least that much tact.

"Can't move that fast with a bunch of girls. It'd be about as fair a fight between a drunk man and the whole town guard if they wanted to chase us."

"I guess that's a fair point."

There was an awkward pause for a moment.

"You didn't actually do it, did you?" She asked in a hushed voice.

"I just left her hanging," I replied, "I'm sure they found her before those old legs of hers gave out."

I was vague enough that she didn't seem to pick up exactly what I was talking about, yet she seemed to believe me. My word seemed enough for her, and she didn't feel the need to press me any further. I did catch a sigh of relief out of the corner of my eye though.

"Besides... Even if she tendered an early resignation, it wouldn't make anything better. For one, we'd have a marauding band of vengeful paladins after us. Two, she might get replaced with someone worse. This isn't bandits, thieves and vigilante justice. There's heavy politics and power plays I'd rather not get tangled up in... And three, the two of us had our differences, we played our cards and we happened to come out on top. Maybe not because it was a fair fight, but a win is a win," I let out a deep sigh, "Only I think it's gonna bite me in the ass later. I just can't seem to think I did the right thing."

We watched the happenings below. It was the type of mingling you'd get at a grade school dance. Everyone lined up against opposite walls, too afraid to cross over... At least from one side. Those kids had a lot of baggage. It didn't help they had been raised from their first memories to fear monsters as creatures that would eat them or steal their souls... Sometimes both at the same time.

Rose waited for half a minute before she spoke, “I think it's gonna be alright for 'em.”

I sighed because I still wasn't able to muster up that much confidence.

“In the end, I'm not much different from the Cardinal or the Abbey.”

Rose looked over at me and tilted her head, “Why's that?”

“It's still not their choice. I'm not their parent, just some stranger dropping them into the lap of more strangers... It's the best I can do, but even I'm not sure if it's the right choice.”

“You should stop thinking and just look,” She said pointing

down below.

Though the village elder and Shoshanah had yet to finish discussions, one of the girls had strayed from the group and ran into one of the village women. She was a little portly with massive knockers and bovine legs, a cow's tail swishing behind her and little horn nubs coming out of her head. The bob cut hair was colored just like the fur on her legs, white with splotches of black. She squat down and smiled warmly at the child who was frozen to the spot in fear. The cow woman just opened up her arms and waited for the child to approach on her own. When she did so slowly, the woman hugged her tight. Two cow ears on the sides of her head flapped in delight while she smothered the poor girl between her massive breasts... But I think I saw the girl's face relax and a smile return to her face.

Rose couldn't suppress her own smile, “See? That one's got one hell of a material instinct.”

“Maternal. It's Maternal instinct, Rose.”

“But look!” She said pointing excitedly at the pair still in mid embrace “They'll be just fine.”

“-Or maybe just end up turning them into monsters themselves.”

“That's what you told Susan to take care of. Make em agree to not push em or force it on 'em. They just need place to stay till they're big enough to take on the world.”

I hemmed and hawed. I still couldn't muster up that much confidence.

Rose leaned over and stuck her face in front of me, “Hey. You really like kids, don'tcha?”

“To be honest, Rose... I could go without dealing with kids for a while.”

“Hmm? That's a shame.”

For some reason, my heart skipped a beat. I looked up at Rose, and I think the feeling might have been mutual. Her face had gone beet red and no doubt mine had as well.

“Ah ha ha ha~” She laughed nervously, “Oh Laven, yer such a kidder. Ah ha ha ha~”

Rose pulled away and sat, curled up defensively, right next to me, still laughing a bit. I was restless and couldn't wipe the red off my face so I stood up to leave that sinking feeling behind. The salamander followed me, and so we stood underneath the tree together and watched the exchanging and mingling below us. It took a bit, but the awkward feeling faded away. That was all Rose needed to break that peaceful silence once again.

“Hey. Laven... Thanks.”

I turned my head to look at her profile, claws folded behind her

back as she rocked back and forth on the heels of her talons, long red pony tail and black ribbon fluttering in the breeze together.

She continued to look ahead as she spoke, “In the cave...” Her face turned to me, and she flashed a big sharp toothed smile, “Let her go!” Rose said in a deep voice trying to mimic my own.

Here came the blush again. I looked away embarrassed, but I couldn't get away from her voice in my ear.

“Although I still coulda' done it on my own,” She boasted.

“Uh-huh, sure, whatever you say, Rose,” I said, teasing her a little.

“Hey! I'm serious!”

“I'm not gonna disagree,” I said in a monotonous sarcastic tone while shrugging my shoulders.

I took a peak back at her and saw her puffing her cheeks out in a pout. There was no way I could keep a straight face when a girl had her face like that. I broke out into a quiet laugh. She couldn't keep it up either, and she also laughed... And then slapped me across the back hard enough to almost knock me over.

“But really...” She began to say seriously, “You were brave. Real brave. Seeing it makes me feel as though I were falling in love with you all over again.”

Thump. My heart almost escaped from my chest with that one. I turned my head away, and a finger of mine strayed and embarrassingly scratched my cheek on reflex as I chucked weakly.

“So smile, Laven! This is your reward for all your blood sweat and tears! Add a notch to your victory count. Take a breather... We got a long way to go yet, right?”

I looked back to see Rose swing her arm and clench her claws dramatically as she puffed out her chest and lifted up her chin with pride and conviction. I couldn't disagree with her.

I did smile and say, “Yeah, that we do.”

“And another thing,” She said while walking around behind the tree with her claws behind her back, “What was that you told Heather back in the cave?

Shit. She was playing uncharacteristically coy as she goose-stepped mechanically. Rose was acting like a cat toying with a mouse.

I tugged at my shirt collar, “I-I'm not sure what you're talking about.”

“Come on. What did ya say? Come on. I thought I heard you say-”

“You must have heard things!” The words came spitting out my mouth. “Lots of falling rocks. The brain does funny things like fill in missing parts to make patterns out of nothing. Yeah. Something like that!”

“Hmmm?” Rose said with a look that had to mean she was just teasing me now. “I'm sure I heard a thing. That's why I'm wondering if it was you saying-”

“And one more thing!” A chipper and high pitched voiced interrupted me.

I flailed when something came from out of my blind spot and jumped up into my chest. I only just barely managed to catch it. A pair of fuzzy paws wrapped around my neck as Ba'el hung off of me while catching me off guard into carrying her princess style once more.

The little demon narrowed her eyes seductively at me and cooed, “My hero~”

“Ack!” Rose muttered as she froze up at the sight of the demon in my arms.

I too voiced my confusion, “Ba'el?”

“What?” She said, halfway between annoyed and confused, “Can't a girl thank her hero too? I must say though, I never expected that kind of guts out of a person like you... What I'm left wondering is why~ you'd be so desperate to save a girl like me~.”

The inflection she was giving certain words along with her seductive gaze was putting me off my center and embarrassing me even further. That caused Ba'el to giggle and kick her legs playfully while in my arms.

“I think I've grown to like you quite a bit... But more importantly, you gotta take some responsibility.”

Rose and I both looked like lightning had struck us both. Ba'el grinned and laughed jovially as a blue pentagram made of light slowly formed on her forehead. I felt a sting on my buttocks soon after it formed completely.

“Wai-What?” I yelped.

I kept holding onto Ba'el with one arm and quickly pulled my jeans down far enough to uncover the searing and stinging feeling that felt like I had just been bitten on the ass. Glowing green and clear as day was a green pentagram just a little off center and to the right on my right ass cheek.

The demon was chipper and her voice jovial, “You never specified terms, but that's just fine with me. I hope we can get along, Big Brother. Eeeeeeek! I've always wanted to say that!”

She removed her hands from my neck to squish her cheeks between her paws as she squealed. I had to quickly pull my hand back to catch her; lest she slip free from my other hand and fall to the ground. Before I could recover completely, she put my head in the vice grip that was her paws and pulled my face down without an ounce of effort to kiss me on the cheek.

Rose's tail erupted into an inferno as she pointed a claw at the

two of us and screamed.

Please no.

"No fair!" she protested, "I was gonna do that next!"

Rose grabbed hold of my left arm and started to shake me back and forth. I almost toppled over; Ba'el had let go and wrapped her arms back around my neck and laughed as we both shook back and forth together.

Another hand grabbed hold of my right arm, Minte had appeared out of nowhere and was staring up at me with a slight blush on her face. Her eyes were a little wet... a little expectant as she stepped up on the tips of her toes to bring her face closer to mine with pursed lips. Chris came from behind; her massive breasts caught my head between them as she leaned on me.

"Hey, what's going on now?" She shouted seemingly oblivious.

Shoshanah came running up last shouting something incoherent I couldn't quite catch as she pointed at everyone. Her face was also flushed red, and she argued with each girl one by one to let me go. Ba'el snidely suggested she was jealous... That caused Susan to fume smoke out of her ears, go completely red and nearly pass out; she exploded into an even greater rage than before.

I stood there, at least I tried to, with a blank look on my face and life no doubt driven from my eyes. This is gonna be a thing now... Isn't it?

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Far to the east of The Marches, on the furthest edge of the continent, night had already fallen. Fierce winds and a spring tide from the full moon caused the cold ocean waters to crash against the shore and an ancient structure that loomed at the cliff's edge: a giant lighthouse long forgotten by the Empire's expansive libraries. Certainly no living human would remember it either. The crashing of fierce, relentless and deadly waves, the salinity of the barren soil layered on worthless rock and the absolute absence of sea life saw to that. It was one out of a series built along the treacherous coast, and it was the only one still left standing after thirteen-hundred years. Against the darkness of the night, only the pale full moon made it cast a shadow and silhouette that made it stand out in the early twilight darkness.

The land was barren, salty brine kicked up from the ocean made sure of that. There were only small tidal animals, barnacles and muscles clinging to the cold rocks. That was until one lithe and graceful figure stepped and leaped off the rocks with quickness, precision and grace. A long black trail of hair and knife tail billowed from her head as she ran; the pale moon reflecting the black and pink of her dress. Her nose and mouth was covered by a pink mask; her

white skin marked by tribal tattoos that told those who knew that they meant that she was a member of the kunoichi Shadow Glade clan, Shizuka.

Weeks ago her master, Milonia, had sent her on a very important mission. She was to find the hideout of the elusive Elektra, princess and daughter of the Demon Lord herself. Her reconnaissance, her sleuthing and her tracking had led her to the end of the world. Beyond the roiling waters were the islands of her ancestors, but to cross the ocean directly instead of around it was suicide for any vessel. Only the denizens of the oceans dared cross those murky black waters. That is why this part of the world has been totally forgotten. There is nothing here to be gained by any man. The only reason this place was built was so it may act as an outpost. A guard house to warn the Empire should the Demon Lord Ulrik'el'Shemsalar invade the Empire's mainland from this far East. It served its purpose and was then left to rest in peace.

Then Princess Elektra reconstructed it.

The height of the lighthouse was impressive. A wide and sturdy twenty stories high. Shizuka wasted no time when she reached it's base and began to climb it using a pair of climbing gloves tipped with sharp claws. The tip of her devil's tail wasn't a spade like others of the succubi type; it was sharp and pointed like a knife, and it could also extend. When she needed to cross a section of the exterior lighthouse that could not support her weight, least the hand and footholds crumble, she secured her feet and threw her tail like a grappling hook. She wrapped the tail around her thighs and made use of it as a makeshift harness to hoist herself up the side of the lighthouse.

Climbing the lighthouse was child's play for the ninja. It didn't take longer than a minute to scale the lighthouse, and she entered it from the only visible entrance, above.

There had once been a magical contraption here to illuminate the land for leagues around. It could even pierce the darkness of the water like daylight, but that light had been removed centuries ago. Yet beneath the lighthouse, in the caverns carved out below, the radiation from an ancient power, nearly undetectable through the bedrock, remained. The kunoichi moved silently down the steps and descended deeper and deeper. She tread carefully, cautiously, until she had gone much further down than twenty stories. At the bottom was a massive set of cast iron doors.

A mighty lock blocked her path, but she wasn't unprepared. Shizuka plucked what looked like a long string of hair from her flowing ponytail. It was actually a long iron needle. She put the tip of it into the lock; and with a quiet spoken ninjutsu, it came to life and wormed its way into the lock. It tumbled the mechanism, and in a flash the lock

was undone. She did not push her way through the door; instead, she muttered one more spell and vanished into a puff of smoke and silently rematerialized on the other side.

Machines were everywhere. Alchemical devices and storage containers and flasks of liquid in all directions. The air was thick with chemicals of all natures, and it buzzed with energy. Still, the ninja leaped into the rafters where tubes and funnels carrying all manner of liquids flowed and bubbled. The lock was nothing, but the maze of all this equipment packed in such a tight space proved an obstacle.

Her presence was less than that of a mouse, but something black and snakelike silently stirred to life in her blind spot.

Shizuka did not sense it, not until it was too late.

"Gotcha!" A childish voice shouted.

The ninja did not panic as the voice she heard called out in all directions. She didn't stand a chance when several black tendrils seized her by the wrists and ankles and then dragged her off the rafters. She fell until the slack of the tentacles ran out and was left hanging spread eagle. She still did not scream. Not even when the childish giggling got closer and the black viscous tentacles rummaged over her skin and wrapped around her breasts and squeezed them underneath her fishnet top. They only ceased their advance when they reached her groin.

"I did not expect visitors, nor do I recall inviting anyway," a woman's voice called out from somewhere deeper in the laboratory.

The childish giggling and molestation did not stop, and the other voice snapped.

"Nerin! Knock it off already!"

"Awwww~," the girly voice pouted.

Something in the form of a young girl but with elvish ears, red colored eyes and teeth more like demonic fangs swung down upside down in front of Shizuka. Her long black hair hung down and swayed to and fro as the girl shifted back and forth. The girl looked like some type of demon, but her legs ended in amorphous blog of black energy which had wrapped themselves up in the rafter above. As the tentacles let go of the ninja, they retreated toward Nerin's shoulders where they gathered and formed two slender arms; beyond where her elbows should rest were black tentacles which still held the ninja aloft.

"Ne-rin!" that voice said again, becoming more impatient.

"Fine!" Nerin shouted angrily and then let the ninja go.

Shizuka gracefully fell to the ground on her feet and knelt. She had been dragged and dropped in one of the few open areas underneath the lighthouse. Even then, papers of figures and data scrawled all over them were strewn everywhere with no apparent rhyme or reason. Nerin meanwhile pulled her tentacles back until she

had fully human hands. Even the black mass wrapped around the rafters pulled back. The girl mysteriously floated in the air even without holding on. The stuff retreated and formed legs, but now the girl was floating in the air, seated on an orb of black that appeared to be made of pure energy. It seemed to perpetually drip droplets of energy off of it. They never reached the ground and the orb appeared to never run dry. That girl was satisfied to sit and watch, still naked, with a playful smile on her face.

The woman behind the voice finally revealed herself. She wore a white lab coat over a very risqué two-piece of black underwear. Her skin was a flawless fair and white. With slender perfect curves and modest bust. Her most charming asset was a set of long alluring legs she clothed in black thigh high stockings and a pair jet black and sexy boots reaching up to her knees. Sprouting out of her back was a pair of demonic wings that were pure white. From out of her spine, a likewise pure white devil's tail tipped with a spade caged in an intricate piece of silver jewelry swished back and forth. Long elven ears protruded from the side of her head graced with a face of beauty that even caused the heart of the unflappable ninja to flutter. The demon's irises were a bright pink. Her shoulder length hair curled into drills which draped over her shoulder was a metallic silvery-green. From the top of her head, one black, large, lonely and large horn satanically curved toward the ceiling.

“Princess Elektra,” the ninja said with respects.

“You are correct.” Her mature soothing voice replied, “I hope for you are-”

“Hey~ Sis? What's all the noise about?” Another voice called out.

Sliding out from behind some shelves was another demon not unlike the other. She rode in slouched on a chair with four wheels. The demon was dressed in an identical white coat, but had a tight tank top and formfitting short shorts on below. She was barefoot, and the way she carried herself showed that she cared very little about her appearance. The woman was shorter, but with all the same dignified and sexy curves, a not so modest bust. On her back were the pearl white wings and tail from her spine. Her ears were elven shaped, and between them was gorgeous face that indeed made her look related to the other woman. Her eyes were brown and were hidden behind a pair of thick rimmed spectacles. Strands of wavy and scruffy waist length metallic silvery orange hair hung from her head, and crowning that head were a pair of comparatively thin sharp black horns that rose up thirty centimeters straight up.

Elektra groaned, “Silvia...”

Shizuka rushed to bow her head again, “Princess Silvia."

“Oh ho? Visitors? It's been quite some time.”

“Silvia, now is not the time to play the fool.”

“Ouch, dear sister,” Silvia said spinning in her chair and dramatically reclining back to clutch her chest with one hand and hold the back of her hand against her forehead. “You should treat your seniors with more respect,” the slovenly demon sarcastically lectured the taller though younger one.

They did not appear to have the grace, but they were one of several princesses. Daughters borne from the union of the Demon Lord and the Hero who was originally sent to slay her. They are the lilim. What happened between those two, and what made them set their difference aside, few know. Each was a potential heir to her mother's throne, and the power they wielded would terrify any mortal.

Electrka turned back to the kunoichi to demand, “Why did you try to hide from us?”

“Sneak! Sneak! But Nerin caught her!” she said while floating around on her back in circles around the room.

“Yes. Good girl, Nerin,” Silvia praised the girl and patted her on the head when she flew down closer toward her.

The girl giggled as the elder lilim smiled, but Electrka grew irritable.

“My master, Mistress Milonia, sent me to bring you a message,” Shizuka said.

“Milonia?” Electrka said with a hint of disgust. “What does that filthy hedonist want? Where would she even get the idea that there would be anything her debauched eyes and ears have seen or heard would interest me? I am far too busy for her dirty jokes.”

“You could learn a few things from her, dear sister,” Silvia said lightheartedly, “You've holed yourself up with books and done your little experiments for as long as I can remember. Not once did I ever catch you going out for fun or bringing a man home.” She rolled her chair over beside the ninja and whispered into her ear, “It's gotten so bad she diddles herself to Aldwin's Constant of Alchemical stability of Ether.”

“Hee hee! Diddle diddle! Elly is gonna become a spinster!” Nerin giggled as she floated on her sphere above them all.

Electrka growled, grabbed hold of the chair and pushed it back. Silvia cackled as she spun round and around while seated, until the motion sickness took hold, and her laughter died down into a pained groan.

The ninja dared not laugh, so she continued through all the absurdity, “Mistress Milonia did encounter an anomaly she though you would be interested in.”

Electrka sighed and turned around. She immediately lost

interest, but before she could tell Shizuka to leave, Silvia spoke up, now upside down in her chair with her head nearly hitting the floor and her bare feet sticking up into the air.

"Come on Sis~ hear her out... Well, if you don't, I want to hear it. She must have worked hard to find this place. Besides, are you really worried about anything that would manage to find its way here."

Silvia said the last bit with narrowed eyes and a twisted smile. It was a smile that could petrify a man to stone.

The younger sister spun and around and looked expectantly at the ninja. Telling the girl to get on it with through not so subtle body language.

"A man. He sloughed off enough abyssal energy to corrupt twenty men into lascivious fools."

Now the ninja had Electrka's attention.

"Come again?" The younger sister asked, her tail flicking back and forth, her wings flapping a little.

"He was passing through with two other monsters. Left the next morning no different from when he arrived. The girls no more affected than he was."

Silvia put her butt back properly in her seat and gave even her rapt and serious attention to the ninja's wild tale.

"Hey... Sis," she spoke softly, "You don't think that-"

Electrka snapped her fingers. The whole lab rumbled; and from the mess surrounding them, dozens of steel block containers lifted up into the air. Nerin squealed as she floated away to dodge them as they danced and orbited above the lilim. Each one moved to her telekinetic whims, and they moved about until they all came to a standstill. Out of them all, one drifted down in front of the snow white demon. The lib opened on its own and a small flat object was retrieved by an invisible hand. Electrka sent the card with a swish of her fingers, and it held in place right before Shizuka's eyes.

"Does he look like this?" Electrka asked with bated breath.

Shizuka studied the object. It appeared to be mostly burnt black to a crisp. Some clear substance encased it where it wasn't and looked like melted glass where it was burnt. On the far right side where it wasn't destroyed was a black and white image of a man. The ninja thought to herself that only a master artist or fairy could make something so detailed but still be so small. There were a jumble of symbols and strange letters she did not know. Below that would have come a name, but it was burnt off with the rest. On top of that was what read,

University of-

The rest was also burnt off.

"Yes. That is him," The ninja confirmed.

The card flew back and was caught between Electrka's slender fingers. A smile appeared on her face for the first time. She did not say anything more than that. The lilim turned her back to Shizuka and tossed the card onto a nearby table.

The Ninja continued, “I also have creditable knowledge that he had come across a shard of the Second Tear... From my informants within Typhoon.”

This news appeared to have no effect on the lilim.

“I have new orders for you. Keep an eye on this man. Do not interfere. Send me updates on his movements. That will be all. You are dismissed.”

The kunoichi's heart jumped. Her pink mask showed the outline of a smile underneath it. Even she could not hide the swelling pride in her breast. It was an honor to receive an order like that from royalty. Shizuka stood back up, saluted by pounding her fist against her shoulder and then vanished in plain sight.

Silvia let out a long whistle, “Wow. A shard, huh? I guess those things are on the move.”

“Yes sister,” Electrka said as she began to pull out more objects from the containing floating around her. “But you remember what mother said. That stone, even in all its pieces, will move as it wills. There is no point in wasting time and effort hastening it or forcing where they go. If they desire to reconstruct itself now, they will gather on their own.”

“If only that snake understood, huh?”

A few torn, tattered and partly burned books emerged from the box. They were also written in the alien language from the card. They were also very thick and made of strange unknown materials and colors not seen before by either lilim.

“There are plenty who are restless. It has been many years of tedium and boredom. I'm not sure if they will wait for Mother's word to begin again.”

“You think so, Little Sis?”

“Take that pale queen for example. She's had her eye on that man long before he was ever born. I do not think she is that into older men.”

A strange oval object with a long snaking thin cord like tail that looked reminiscent of a small rodent was next to float free of the box. It coiled up on itself and lay down on the table.

“So what are you excited about?” Silvia asked, cleaning the insides of one ear with an extended pinky.

“Experiment Efta-Franc-54,” Electrka said ominously.

“In a modern tongue, perhaps?” Silvia asked raising her eyebrow, “My business is in cryptozoology. Not your theoretical

cosmology."

"I thought it was a failure... Maybe it wasn't after all. It will take some time, but we'll need to reboot it and proceed to phase two."

Silvia looked as though she had already lost interest, so she spoke while spinning around in her chair and staring up at the ceiling.

"It's not like we have to worry about time or energy... But was it a failure? Would you count out all those weird artifacts that showed up?"

She stopped spinning; a thought had crossed her mind, and her rapt attention turned back toward her sister.

"Then again, you told me they weren't worth anything in the big picture. Yes. I remember it now. You said, 'If it isn't a step in the right direction to figure out what keeps monsters and humans apart, they are not worth anything'."

"Perhaps," Electrka said curtly.

One last object appeared from the box, a wooden case. It opened up on its own just as the metal crate did. A parade of small cylinder objects flew out and began to orbit around the lilim's head. Round tips, colored brass, a cylinder body, colored what looked like a shade of gold and round silver circles on the underside of each object. Aside from an old faded letter with more alien language, a larger object still flew up and out of the box at the demon's command. It was curved and shaped like a boomerang, except that the object was made of metal and had many intricate moving parts. One part of it fit a human hand perfectly. Rough, wood-like surfaces flanked the grip on each side, but they felt unlike any other material she had ever seen. All these metal pieces danced and rotated in front of her.

"But everything needs context, dear sister," the lilim smiled, the pink coloration of her eyes glowing bright, "Everything in context."

Epilogue: Star-Crossed

The current time and date at this juncture is dusk; twelve weeks and four days past the vernal equinox. We have retired this evening at a quaint inn colloquially known as the Prancing Poultry. Eleven days have elapsed since the destruction of the Crone and her New Moon Sabbath. For as many days we have been harried by the consequences of our own success.

In exchange for our company's safe passage to the Free Ports we were to investigate, and if possible, dismantle the New Moon Sabbath. Grand Cardinal Ulmpher was our sponsor, and shed light on a division within the Almighty's Church. We hoped this could be exploited to our benefit. However, upon completing our task, we were informed that the prior conditions were no longer satisfactory. Only relinquishing the body of the baphomet, whom Laven rescued, would suffice. Since she was instrumental in the Sabbath's destruction, and due to his nature, he declined her demands, cordially. Our differences were then resolved, amicably, and we agreed to go our separate ways.

Now our prospects appear bleak and our gallery of options deteriorates with each passing day. If only Christophaclies were many times larger; our company could take to the skies and make this journey brief. However, being ferried individually, and thereby separated for extended periods of time, would now put us all at undo risk. What strength we have left can no longer risk being diluted. Without knowledge of the road ahead we cannot plan for contingencies. It is likely the Church will seek retribution the moment we expose an iota of weakness.

At least for the short term we need not concern ourselves with Church forces. Tolerance of monsters in this region is fortunately substantial. This is, however, a consequence of its geography rather than the philosophy of its inhabitants. This Prancing Poultry is nestled between two demon realms of significant size, so it is likely the denizens here wish not to, as the saying goes, 'rock the boat'. Why would we, who are mostly monstrous ourselves, avoid those regions? It is with profound irony that we are safer here.

The tavern air is rife with rumors that both realms fall under the shadow Typhoon's influence. Our previous encounters with Typhoon implores us to restrain ourselves to more neutral areas. And to that, avoiding conflict has become an increasingly arduous task. The further I investigate potential routes southbound, the more inevitable our clash with the gale force of Typhoon becomes. Our hand will eventually be forced, however, tis not to our benefit that we clash at this present time. The alternative would be to delve into Empire and Church controlled lands. That would be certain suicide after all that has

transpired with the Grand Cardinals and the Inquisition.

Back to more immediate matters: There was no vacancy at this Prancing Poultry, but our presence ended up permitted in the fallow fields adjacent. The accommodations are not ideal, yet should suffice for access to adequate utilities and security. Over a hundred other souls crowd these fields. They did, however, keep their distance from us. It graced us with a welcome degree of privacy. Whole families and entire communities shared the same objective as us. Their backs were laden with everything they owned and the sight of it is heartbreaking. Doubly so in the frightened look of children as they did not even play. They merely meandered without purpose about their wagons and cowered the campfire in the arms of their mothers or whoever would accept them.

No price appears too hefty in the pursuit of hegemony across Cokraine.

The obstacles in our shared journey accumulate unceasingly. For these poor souls, it is their powerlessness, for us, it is fear of our power. Not only from the Empire's fanatic ecclesiarchy or terrorist cells of Typhoon, but lawless territories plague these northern corners of the Empire. These lands are fiefdoms of the old feudal system in name only. Absentee families have set up theirs courts within the safe regions nearer to the capital. A substantial number have gone so far as to take refuge in the southern territories of the Empire. This has left the local peasantry with no avenue to petition their lords and ladies for redress. Tension increases exponentially with every act, minor and major, that erodes Imperial authority.

Pagan communities scattered about the northern territories progress without pause toward the breaking point. The time is nigh when the North shall no longer tolerate further persecution and crusades waged against them. Certainly not when it is done under the thin guise of protecting humanity from monsterkind. Not when the security guaranteed to them by their lords and masters deteriorates. Lawless bands of outlaws run rampant along the major trade routes and the north is gradually being cut off from the Empire. Of course, if all the bandits were mere men, our situation would not be so dire

It took me a great deal of effort to dissuade some opinions in our company from conflict against these lesser foes. Simply forcing our way through would only serve to cause a power vacuums. The bandits could readily fall upon one another to fill the voids caused by our violence. This could only lead to further harming of innocents. After everything which has been done in our names over the past weeks, I cannot allow any further damage to be the result of our direct actions.

All predictions from models I have calculated come to the same conclusion, there is an eighty-seven percent likelihood that use of

sufficient force to carve a path (also accounting for the likelihood of resistant and pursuit) would destabilize this entire region. Furthermore, I have also foreseen the risk of bounties placed upon on us due to desires of revenge and to enforce a sort of solidarity among thieves. The lawless band's own unwritten code of ethics I have been able to divine suggest they wish to maintain the current status quo; the ninety-three percent chance of this occurring is too great a risk.

Yet as we travel the final and most insidious threat to our journey has now at last begun to raise its grotesque visage. With the appetites of our current companions, the bribes we must pay and the lack of guild presence in these lawless regions, we run into the most troublesome problem we currently face-

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"What'cha scribblin' away at here?" A childish voice rang out.

I was pulled back reality rudely. Upon looking up, I could not but see a mass of osseous material had interjected itself in front of my tome. The sharp pointed ends danced precariously close to my eyes as the miniature interloper they belonged to bounced to and fro without care. My spine went rigid from the tip of my tail to the nape of my neck, so I shut my golden tome and cradled it away behind my paws.

Twas not the wisest course of action. My reflexes stemmed from having my privacy so suddenly violated, but that is likely not the first impression which would be deduced from my actions.

The round face of the demon slowly looked up and menaced me with her wide grin; green eyes narrowing with suspicion. Ba'el suspected I had something to hide, but I had no means of knowing how long she had been present and what she had already observed. Her mischievous expression morphed into a knowing smile as she slowly backed away from the tree I sat under.

With her chin in paw, she thought hard and mused, "Hoceptian, right? Been a long time since I've seen anyone use it."

A painful throb coursed through my chest. My heart sunk, as if seized by some ethereal hand. I cannot recall any discussion whence I mentioned that old and forgotten language. Yet I could not be surprised. The girl before me has existed far longer than my own spirit. With tepid anticipation, I held the spirit of life within my bosom and without so much as a single breath from me to hinder time's passing. The demon thought hard, but not long and quickly retired.

"Never seen it wrote like that before though. Is it some kind of colonial dialect?..."

I let slip a long sigh as my shoulders deflated. It was foolish of me to wish that even she would possess any knowledge on the matter at all. The curves and intricacies of each pictogram and the heavy

tome cast from pure gold was all I had left. It was all there was left of what I had once called home. Everything else has been lost and forgotten. It would be better to let those things rest in peace.

"Or~" Ba'el sang impishly with a sly grin, "Are you jotting something down with a cipher? You naughty girl you. What are you trying to hide?"

"It was never my intention to hide anything," I replied with more palatable confusion than I cared to display. "I am merely updating my records of our journey thus far."

"Uh-huh, sure you are," Ba'el chided me in disbelief.

After all this time, I am still unable to comprehend the intricacies of this demon's logic which fuels her sometimes bizarre and nonsensical actions. No matter how long or hard I peer into her I see nothing but an abyss; a shroud draped over something hidden further in the darkness. She is shrewd, but equally juvenile. Whether it is by design to maintain a childish impression of innocence or merely part of her true careless nature, I cannot say. A cornucopia of experience gained through millennium appears to have sieved through that horn crowned skull of hers. She stubbornly refuses to divulge what knowledge she does possess, or her memory is shattered and more unreliable than my own. That too is a frightening proposition. Tis almost enough to solicit sympathy from-

"-Or are you just trying to slack off while everyone else is busy?"

Her choice of words and the tone in her voice caused an ear to twitch involuntarily; it was only with great effort I managed to maintain a straight face. This was the other side of that feigned innocence. Unlike a demon of high pedigree and pride, Ba'el delights herself with the aggravation of others. Not today. I shan't bring myself to such a level and engage with her on those terms.

A cursory look informed me that not much had changed since I had last looked up from my tome: Rose and Christophaclies tended the campfire where they prepared tonight's meal. The same conversation they were having while the sky was blue has yet to cease. With heated passion, they argued in circles over frivolous trivialities such as which famous heroes and beasts of ages past would prevail in the most ridiculous of gladiatorial arenas. Minte sat upon a branch in the tree above me. Song birds sang their farewells to the day all around her. Two perched themselves on one finger each; she watched them with rapt attention and sparkling eyes, the song birds paid more concern to her than any of the other branches. Despite all that, I could sense her insect eyes a top her head were scanning the area; her long antennae likewise twisted and twirled about to taste the air

Lastly, Laven was beyond the campfire. He labored with the sheets, rope, wooden poles and stakes of the tents we had recently procured. The summer rainy season will soon be upon us, but he insisted on being used to pitching them rather than fumbling when the skies were gray. Pragmatic, but I could sense the frustration as he struggled alone in vain.

I cast my eyes back upon the demon, “If you are free to bother me in an effort to alleviate yourself from your boredom, why not render assistance elsewhere?”

Ba'el clicked her tongue, obviously none too pleased with my harsh tone. Yet she did not hesitate for long; she shrugged her shoulders and exaggerated the raising of her paws.

“No one asked, so I wasn't gonna bother.”

I was not surprised.

“Did you perchance not see Laven is currently in need of some assistance?”

The demon twirled her paw dismissively in a circle, “Been there, done that. He hasn't given up yet, has he? Men have their pride too, he's a stubborn one to boot. He wasn't gonna take my charity. No, not till he figures it out on his own. Sometimes men gotta feel they are useful, even if it makes them look like fools in the process. I'd spoil all the fun if I helped.”

“How convenient for you,” I growled.

“Yeah yeah, you just keep bending over backwards for him and see how that works out for him. Oh, yes master, your wish is mine to grant, master,” Ba'el spoke fluttering her eyebrows whilst taunting me in a voice that was a mockery of my own. “Allow me to massage your feet, wash your back. I'm such a stuck up bitch with an ego the size of a pyramid. Your problems are nothing, nothing I can't just solve myself. Allow me to feel like a big girl by-”

I calmly retrieved an artifact pressed between the pages of my tome. Twas a small and insignificant thing. Nothing more than a coin sized ankh crafted from the same sacred gold as my tome. As the demon continued to prattle on in an attempt to upset me for her own amusement, and while her eyes were shut and defenseless, I gently pressed the relic against her bare forehead. Not even a second later, smoke rose from the point of impact. Three seconds later, the Demon finally noticed and froze on the spot.

“Zaph are's u xesprew!” An infernal tongue slipped out from the demon's lips as she reached up and swatted the ankh off her forehead.

I must confess that I found a great deal of satisfaction from watching that. If only I had done so at an earlier date. There was no way for me to know what profanity she spewed, nor did I care. All I

could preoccupy myself with was not undignifying myself by laughing at the black scorch upon her head in the shape of the ankh. Tis a shame it did not leave a permanent mark. After some scrubbing with the reverse side of her paw, it was gone.

"When speaking ill of those who would help-" I began with aggravatingly haughty tone, "-and saying they make others weak by removing the onus of their burden so as rob them of strength gained by overcoming it: You would best remember the tale of a demon who immunized herself against the holy for so many years that the most simple of relics now harms her once stripped of that shield."

Ba'el grit her teeth tight, with moist eyes where the start of tears lingered before she fought them back. I bore witness to genuine anger, the first time I had seen it within the demon. Her eyes were like sharpened daggers. There was enough power in those small arms of hers to tear me apart, and more than enough power in her breast to vaporize the ground I sat upon, but she did not; not even a word was offered in rebuttal.

For a being as strong and powerful as she, Ba'el has proven notorious for being incredibly unengaged. Worse yet, she was equally frivolous. I would have my doubts about her very presence here if it were not for the nature of her predicament. Rather than commit herself to rebuilding a disguise and disappear as she had done for decades, the demon decided to cling onto Laven instead. When she destroyed her old apprentice, she too should have been obliterated, so she claims. It is only through Laven's own intervention when... he- he made a pact that unwittingly bound the demon to himself.

It had better be that he made it unwittingly.

So help me- Nevertheless, her powers have diminished, but her destructive power and magic have remained intact to a degree which is not so easily dismissed. I would normally be opposed to a demon's presence: their virtue is scarce and their morals are pillars of sand, however, she cannot act true to her uninhibited desires. Ba'el's immortality has been compromised. Should her body sustain irreparable damage, it will not be hell she is banished back to. Due to her transgression of ancient demon law, she has been effectively been exiled from Pandemonium and thus would be cast into oblivion instead. She would be erased from existence. So too would she meet such a fate if Laven suddenly departed the land of the living. Verily, it is a fitting leash and muzzle for someone so potentially dangerous.

I take comfort, if only a little, that despite her villainous and unpredictable nature she has a vested interest in my liege's continued well being. Without Laven to anchor her here, she would face a destruction which I myself cannot even begin to contemplate. Therefore, despite any inclinations she may have otherwise, and due

to Laven's good matured kindness, I tolerate whatever assistance she can offer. The time will come when we will need to turn her loose upon our enemies. I wish it were not so, but I cannot deny further bloodshed is inevitable and she would prove a valuable asset in that regard. If only she could prove useful in other ways during the meantime and not persist in being a constant nuisance.

However, I shall always remain vigilant. Under no circumstance will I suffer this petite demon corrupting the pureness of my pharaoh. That is why I shall never truly trust this precocious goatish imp. This task will no doubt fall upon me to a great degree, for I have one weapon in my arsenal against her incomparable physical strength and frightening magic potency.

"You're trying to work out our money problems, right?" Ba'el said suddenly and so seriously.

She threw me off center. It was unexpected to say the least, but her words were true. I thought I was the only one to have noticed our more insidious threat, the one from the enemy within.

"If that's what you wanted to ask all this time, then why not do so?"

The only answer I received was yet another apathetic shrug.

"It ain't hard to figure out. The kind of food those two over by the fire can put away is something else. Can't quite get three square meals a day while on the move too. Oh, and that guild business, it ain't paying its dividends, right? Kinda hard to throw about IOUs and run a tab on some sleazy little merchants who packed up shop and ran for the hill."

She definitely put it together. Not even Laven has noticed yet. His mind has been elsewhere and I have kept it to myself to prevent panic.

"Not even enough to pay for six in the inn, right? Well, they didn't need to know that. Gave us that complimentary side of pork as an apology." Ba'el smothered a hearty laugh, "That look on his face when that orc they keep around gave it to him with nothing but smiles on her face... It was adorable."

After shaking my head at her poor taste in humor, I set the conversation back on track, "Yes. That is precisely the dilemma I was set to address next before you so rudely interrupted me."

"I don't know why you keep dropping it everywhere we go. If you wanted more gold, there's been plenty of time to just take it. Plenty of times to just keep it."

"We. Are. Not. Brigands."

"Yeah, if you paid attention, you'd have noticed we're already thought of as worse. And that's not just to a few, we're talking about a lot of people here. Why bother with the holier than thou act?

We're not gonna make friends by playing pretend."

"Only the truth matters, demon. I care not for what the masses and the Imperial Church believes. I shall not abide we denigrate ourselves, no matter the boon it offers, to meet their beliefs and expectations of us."

"So you'd rather starve, freeze and wander aimlessly looking and praying for someone, or something, to cut you some slack? Just get it over with and break on through."

"Yes. And so too shall you find yourself alone in this regard."

"Fine. Whatever! Everyone just ignore the 'demon'," Ba'el whined whilst she threw her paws up into the air and paced back and forth. "Anything the demon suggests is just evil by definition. She doesn't actually want to help or anything. That sure doesn't hurt my feelings or anything. No mam, not one bit!"

Perhaps I was too dismissive. Although I could not perceive her true nature beyond darkness, my intuition told me she truly wished to help.

"And what, pray tell, did you exactly have in mind?" I asked, against my better judgment.

Ba'el's frustrated face transformed immediately into a sleazy smile. I was going to stop her before she began, but she slid right back up against me in an instant. She leaned in close enough so she could speak directly into my ear. I was tempted to get up and retreat.

With a silver tongue any merchant would sell their soul to possess, she whispered softly and earnestly, "We got a lot of talent going on here. If we're running low on money, we just need to sell it for a premium. Ya following me?"

I immediately voiced my objections, "We don't have the time nor the connections to safely-"

"No no no, don't be such a Negative Nelly," the demon said while waging her finger. "It's all a matter of supply and demand. We got something that is in high demand and we're just letting in squander away."

"Ba'el, please refrain from wasting my precious time with-"

"Whoa there, girl. Hang on. Let me finish. All we gotta do to pull in some serious coin to fund our trip from here to the coast is to turn a couple of tricks here and there."

"Ba'el quit wasting my time speaking in riddles."

"Oho~" Ba'el grinned, "Aren't we the little angel? Or are you just pulling my leg now?... Anyway, there are a lots of lonely souls wandering around in this cesspit. They got more than enough in exchange for some-"

What the demon was saying suddenly clicked. My face went bright red from a clash of anger and embarrassment. The very thought

she tried to slip into my mind caused my paws to shudder and clench until the point they pained me.

"A high priestess such as myself does not debase herself with such debauchery," I hissed though clenched fangs and lips quivering with fury. "Neither would I ever betray my-"

"Whoa whoa whoa! Whoa there again," Ba'el said waving her paws desperately in order to have me stop. "That's not what I was saying at all." The demon shook her head in disappointment before explaining herself, "Really now, I thought you were supposed to be smart. Think on that for a second... Can you really sell something for anything when there's more than enough peddlers just giving it away for free? No no no... What I'm saying here is we dress up Laven in a bit of tight leather, go into the nearest demon realm and I bet you'll have a line up from one side of town to the other for just one-"

What clicked inside me, just now snapped.

"Ba'el!" I said whist gnashing my teeth.

It was unbecoming of me, but I could not hold back my anger any longer. And then the demon's serious expression cracked. She took one look at me and she could no longer contain herself. What started as a snort quickly transformed into outrageous laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha! The look on your face: priceless!" Ba'el laughed while making a frame with her paws to glance at me through, but she soon doubled over in laughter. "I could never in a million years imagine you with that look on your face!"

The demon continued to laugh to the point she could hardly breathe, let alone speak. I was left absolutely unamused. It took everything I had to remain civil and wrest control of my expression that was further fueling the imp's laughter. At last, Ba'el wiped the tears from her eyes and regained her composure.

"I'm joking. That was a joke, stupid.... Like I'd actually throw pearls before swine."

This is precisely why I find myself unable to tolerate this demon. Every time I grant her the benefit of the doubt, she betrays my expectations in order to play some childish prank. Allowing myself to be worked up any further would only spurn her on, so I inhaled deep breaths and calmed myself the best I could. So too did Ba'el follow suit until we were both staring at one another in silence.

Until she titled her head to the side and with a straight face asked, "Unless you actually think it's a good idea."

"OUT!" I roared.

I ordered myself to remain calm, yet failed miserably. Shame fell upon me when I quickly regained my senses. Twas then I noticed that the ground had rumbled, and only once I realized it, did it fade away. A gust leftover from gale force winds rustled the grass and

leaves. My eyes stung as if they had been replaced with burning red hot coals. Most foreboding of all, black light cast shadows ever so my Marks of Anubis before returning to white. When I gazed upon Ba'el, her paws were cupped over her ears. Her round face was scrunched up in pain and I spied a thin trickle of blood flow from her tiny nose.

"Ooooooow!" Ba'el moaned, "Yeesh, alright, alright! You don't have to go all out and shout power words at me."

Ba'el stumbled during her hasty retreat. She could still not cure herself of the ringing inside her skull which had thrown her off balance. The demon tried in vain to cure herself of it by plunging a finger into her ears. Of course, she did not depart before leaving a trail of curses behind her.

"Who does she think I am? Some sorta' gin and tonic bar's two-copper succubus? I used to be a duke for all the hells' sake, give me more credit than that. Hmph, I'm gonna go find the bug. It's a lot more fun trying to get any reaction out of that girl than play with this bitch. And to think I ever wondered where she kept that staff of hers. Should've known better when she's that stuck up all the time. I even give her a hint and she still-"

She has routinely underestimated my auditory senses, but I have no intention of informing her of that anytime soon. Much the same way that she has not yet gauged the full spectrum and depth of my abilities. Even so, when next I pray I must ask for forgiveness; forgiveness for overstepping my authority in invoking such a curse at such an inappropriate time, for such an inexcusable reason.

But at least I am free at last resume my duties. I learned my head back and saw Minte had already vanished along with the birds. Perhaps it was my fault, but her escaping before Ba'el found her, is to the girl's benefit.

Even onto this day I cannot fathom how any of the others, and especially Laven, are able to deal with that demon's antics. Neither do I suspect I will ever in the immediate or far flung future. I am unsure whether I am jealous or not of their ability to do so. My fear lies in order to do so myself, I would need to part with some precious part of my sanity. So long as the ground rules exist, and we share similar goals, I will respect Laven's wish that we all cooperate. If only it were not such an improbability that the demon would likewise do the same.

Now I could return my attention to the tome. One final entry about our departure from the North Marches would suffice. I set my index claw aglow and began to etch the pictograms into the soft gold.

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We were bid farewell by the orphaned children we rescued from the clutches of the Crone; their foster families also extended their gratitude. I managed to negotiate with the village elder and have her

swear upon her honor to raise those children well. She would refrain from influencing their decision to stay or leave upon reaching adulthood. Nor would she pressure or council those children to give up their humanity. Our paths were to diverge, and likely never to meet again, it was our only chance to give these children the life of peace and freedom they deserve. That is how Laven wished it to be.

Twas all we could do for those poor children. There was no other safe harbor for them, no other option which would not result in their imprisonment, or worse, execution. After potentially being tainted by abyssal energy, they would be considered a liability in human communities. There is no natural system in the human female form to purge itself of such a magical taint. It will dwell there, potentially awakening if agitated, aggregating until reaching critical mass.

Despite all its shortcomings, I felt as though Laven would take pride This act of charity on our behalf was accomplished with great personal cost. Laven appears troubled ever since leaving the farmstead nine days ago. He puts on the appearance of having left it behind, but I can tell from his eyes, and his aura, that it continues to torment him. Perhaps he feels guilt for forcing those girls along a certain path as other before have done. Mayhap some encounter with the Crone and her sabbath have disturbed him in some way. I can do nothing but speculate, he refuses to open his heart on the matter. The past days have been a forced march further south and west and I have been unable to reserve even a moment to investigate what ails him. The frustration and feeling of

helplessness that I sense within Laven has afflicted myself. With a heavy heart, I am ashamed to report my failure in fulfilling my duties these past-

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I nonchalantly gazed upon Laven once more. After all this time, he still struggles with find the appropriate knot. A savior from his struggles quickly arrived; with involatile energy in stow, Rose bounded toward Laven with a steaming bowl in tow. I pried my eyes away to continue scribing, yet my attention invariably returned to the scene. With a broad smile, she thrust the fresh pork stew onto him. Not even stubborn Laven could hold her off, and he soon ceased to struggle with the materials of the tent. They exchanged empty platitudes while Rose lavished him with inane boasts and words of encouragement. And he smiled in return.

My heart fluttered, but quickly sank into my diaphragm and I struggled to breath. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. Why? I had felt the tension he exuded, the weight upon his soul, but it was gone in an instant. His expression as of late was weary. Laven was someone who understood the world as cruel, and that colored him jaded and cynical.

Yet he was still driven by a desire to do good in spite. It saved others, even it cost saving himself. There was nothing of that in that smile now upon his face.

The longer I peered into that glowing white aura, the pain in my chest increased exponentially. His eyes were not even upon me, but I could not look at it. He gazed upon Rose instead and-

No. Cease these ugly thoughts, there is work to be done. I shan't allow myself to be distracted now, not after managing to drive Ba'el away. Rose and Laven conversing as they always do- it is not something to get upset over. This is how it is between those two. Nothing more. It is nothing to become agitated over. I am most certainly not jealous. That is not the nature of this unpleasant feeling. I am above such things!

Another entry, that is what is required of me. The pages of my tome are not finite and there is an interesting diversity of the local fauna to document. There is a plethora of divergence between the southern regions compared to the far north. Of all the indigenous wild grasses, tubers and herbs that could be used by the local to prepare a rather delicious looking-

My claws reached up to the sides of my head and I ruthlessly tousled my long locks into disarray. I growled at my own flippantness and attempted to banish the thought from my mind in vain. The hearty smell of the stew's broth wafted into my aggravatingly astute and observant nose. Laven's expression betrayed his surprise that the bumbling buffoon of a brawler could manage to prepare something that succulent with so little. Rose's chest swelled with pride as her tail popped and crackled with fresh embers as it swayed back and forth behind her.

No no no no- Aside from the local vegetation, various types of song bird and small rodents are noticeably different from their northern cousins. With visibly more colorful plumes and lighter hides, their behavioral patterns are also diverged significantly. There is even a different mating season which makes cross breeding with their northern cousins less likely. On matters such as-

As I glared at the empty gold page, the image of his smiling face appeared as a hallucination before my eyes. No! Those thoughts are separate. They are not to be conflated! I am not at all concerned at the moment with where those eyes and warm smile are directed. Even as they so casually touch, prod, slap and beat upon one another, that's- That accursed Ba'el! Curse her for planting that wretched seed of a thought in my mind! For such a common thing as a smile to do this to me now. The very thought of it is absurd. How dare she treat my liege as a play thing. Even in nothing but the barest of leather, sweating in the daytime heat and covered in a glistening layer of palm

oil-

I shook my head again, when my eyes refocused I saw my idle hands had etched an image of Laven on the gold page as- From my face down through the rest of my body. A hoarse yelp escaped from my throat and I flushed red. With a flash, I Illuminated the pad of my paw, and frantically scrubbed the page smooth. My shoulders sagged and I buried my red faced visage further into the book. I glanced only once over the edge to see that no one was still looking my way. Twas a small comfort and I sighed in relief whilst retreating behind the tome.

Accounting, local history, recent proclamations and edicts! A precedent set by one Mr. Walger vs Mrs. Derite over a fencing and property conflict. I filled the pages one by one. Anything to serve as a suitable distraction. There was work to do, too much work to do. I could not afford to allow myself to be so incredulous as to distract myself with foolish tribulations that belong instead to a young, naive and base little girl!

At last exhaustion overtook me. Several pages were covered in jumbled messes of script that even I myself could not decipher. My claw went dull as I resigned, and the light dancing at its tip flickered weakly until it died. With the sturdy tree trunk at my back, I cast my eyes upward where the canopy of green filtered the last red rays of sunlight. I closed my eyes as my paws drew the covers of my tome shut.

For now, I could only think to meditate. My evening prayer was long overdo. I chanted the ritual as I always do, closed my eyes and quietly departed into my mind's eye. Twas nothing but a void now. An empty expanse with a single glowing orb of light. But that was how it has always been. It was all I had left. To it I offered my prayers. I sought strength, wisdom and its blessings.

Yet no matter how hard I prayed, the luminescent sphere remained silent. There was no reassuring voice, no gentle face or stern expression of disapproval. No demanding avatar of the Sun, River, Sky nor of Death and Law was there to greet me. No guidance was offered and no edict or order existed to be received. There was no will to this solitary orb of light. It merely gave and never asked for anything in return. But that could not be; the gods were demanding, they were capricious, they were all powerful and all-seeing. Yet they were not here. Only this small light of theirs was left behind. Had it been left behind for me? Where have they departed to?

Why are you not here now when I need you most? Was I not there for you? Did I not wait for so many lifetimes?

As I opened my eyes, I saw that the red rays of the dusk had been replaced by the ink of twilight. A chill breeze washed over me as only the stars in the heavens above illuminated the landscape.

How embarrassing. I selfishly drifted off during meditation. As my mind stirred back to wakefulness, something weighed me down. A canvas of fabric was draped over me. Its texture and color was that of the tents which Laven failed to assemble. I perceived a scent heavy within it; it smelled of Laven. The thought of him draping this over my slovenly self seemed very much like him.

I noticed the slumbering forms of the others laying about the fire. Rose lay with her arms and body wrapped around the wyvern's tail. The wyvern slept facing the other way, blissfully unaware. Ba'el lay slovenly, snoring and scratching her exposed belly in an unladylike fashion. Minte slept lay curled up by the smoldering campfire, although her antennae appeared as though she were still awake. It was rare to even see her sleep... But I did not spot a sentry. Several days have passed since we could last afford ourselves a rest such as this, and certainly doubtful that our enemies would be so rash in the face of so many potential witnesses nearby, but I was profoundly disappointed regardless. My absence always appears to prophesize a breakdown of responsibility.

There was, however, one less silhouette in the darkness than there should be. My heart raced upon realizing that the missing individual was Laven himself. Hours of sitting propped against this tree caused my weary and slumbering legs to waver, but the surge of adrenaline remedied their fastidious demands for restraint. I peered though the twilight, yet still failed to see him. With my nose lifted into the night air, I breathed quickly and picked up his scent. It was fresh, so he no doubt had not strayed far. I wrapped the tent sheet around my shoulders to keep the cold at bay and went on the hunt.

Twas not a long stroll after all. Laven was but a mere thirty seconds from the camp where I spotted the man lying down at the top of a hill. It gave an advantageous view over the congregation of other travelers far below where not soul stirred. I approached tacitly and took due diligence to disturb the long grass. Upon further inspection, I saw that his eyes were closed: his face was tense and his breathing shallow. I knelt down beside him and studied his features as he slept. His face was tense and his body was frigid. I knew not what madness brought him out here to freeze in the late spring evening.

Something about the look on his face disquieted me. I leaned closer due to the faint moonlight being insufficient even for my eyes and I saw that Laven's face was not only tense, but also looked pained. His brow was furrowed and his lips were pursed. My curiosity seized control of me and I leaned in ever closer. I held my hair back with one paw and held myself over him with the other as I slunk ever closer.

What am I doing?

I hovered a nose's length away from Laven's face when I shook my head gently. I know not what came over me, so I sought to purge myself of the strange though whilst looking nervously to the left and right. There was no one else nearby, so why was I so racked with concern as though someone were watching over my shoulder in disapproval. When I looked back, I saw a pair of blue sphere staring back at me. With blackened bags beneath them, they were unfocused and dull, but pierced me all the same.

"Huh?" was the only sound that burrowed out from the lump in my throat

"Wha?" Laven mumbled in a daze.

I yelped. With all my strength, I pushed away and full backward and fell onto the ground behind me. I landed on the base of my tail and tears welled up within my eyes. The sudden cry and movement caused Laven to panic as well. He rolled over, shielding his face with his hands. After his heart was finished pounding, and his mind had caught up with his survival instincts, he glared at me.

"Susan? What the hell?" he yelled, visibility agitated.

Susan- I am disappointed whenever I hear that name, but I ignore it this time. If only because his state of mind while saying it was forgivable- But it was not he who would ask the questions.

I quickly turned his indignation back onto him, "I shall ask the same of thee. What absence of good senses would compel you to abandon the safety of the camp? What would you have done should harm have sought you out? What assistance could we possibly render in time?"

Laven diverted his eyes. I looked down to see my knees splayed, and I quickly shut them. But there was sadness instead of shame in his eyes. He hadn't even noticed my unladylike position. He instead tried to hide something else behind a wry grin. His body was weary and he naught the strength left to put forward a satisfactory effort. He lay back down amongst the grass and cast his eyes at the stars above. But as quickly as his gloom set in, it was banished. He steered his gaze back onto me as a droll smile crept over his face.

"Well, that isn't true. After all, you came along, didn't you?" Laven said.

My heart thumped. Although I had resolved myself to be indignant, my body shook and my paws fidgeted as I clawed nervously at the hem of my pant legs. The more I focused on how embarrassed I felt, and no doubt looked, the worse it became. Even my tail betrayed me as it swished behind me and against my will. I should not be so flustered after hearing such simple empty words; even if they come from him.

Yet something clicked. I recalled seeing that look which now

was upon his face before. A minor twitch from the corner of his lip, he was trying too hard to hold back a laugh.

I pointed down and nearly exploded, “D-d-don't play me for a fool, Laven! Do not for a moment t-think you can worm thyself out of this. These are serious matters. It is not up for ridicule. And why would you do something as mischievous and pretend to be asleep?”

“Pretend to be asleep?” Laven reiterated, “I wasn't sleeping or pretending to be asleep, I was just resting my eyes- and thinking... Wait. Why does that part matter? What were you doing close-”

“D-do not change the subject now!” I yelled

He looked off to the side and frowned; his ruse having been foiled. My anger rose as it replaced the void left behind by my embarrassment. But I would not say anything further about that. Tis not a time to be so upset. No, there would be no better time than now to seek the answers to the questions I needed to ask. Perhaps now would be the only time, in a long time, I would have such a private rendezvous with Laven. If there is something he cannot speak to all, then I pray that he might find confidence in sharing it with me. To that, I must first ask-

“Are you alright, Shoshanah?” Laven looked me in the eyes and asked.

“Huh? Wuh?” I blubbered foolishly.

“You were sitting at that tree all day. You hardly spoke, you didn't eat anything and it looked like you were stressing out over something... Actually- you look really stressed out right now too.”

Wait. No. What? What is happening? I was about to- No, I mean I was the one who was supposed to- No, I shall not allow myself to be fooled twice in a row. He is dodging me on purpose and he is hiding something- My head became a quagmire before I realized it. Everything started to spin as I became dizzy from overheating as I felt myself flush red once again. He noticed? He was watching all this time? Was my worrying misplaced?

“You never take so long to figure out something,” he said, making things progressively worse for myself. “Maybe if you bounce it off me I can-”

At last I broke. I panicked and lashed out:

“You!” I shouted.

Laven stared at me for a moment before sitting back upright with a confused look upon his face. But that did not last for long, as he picked up on my anger, he too became furious.

“What?” he shouted back.

“Day after day, you just- you... you pretend like there's absolutely nothing gone awry, but I see it. You think if you just keep it all to thyself, that will trouble no one else! You fool, you foolish

incredulous lout!”

“And why are you acting all high and mighty all of a sudden?” Laven said while laughing bitterly, “You don't think I don't notice that look on your face when you sulk in the corner for hours on end? What am I supposed to think when you get frustrated and start pulling at your hair?”

I could not hide my surprise and I asked with my mouth agape.

“You were actually- watching?”

Wait. No. That's not true. Every time I look at him, his attention always lies elsewhere. Not once did we ever even exchange so much as a- The night air went silent again. Laven and I both looked at one another. Everything we were prepared to say refused to come forth. His eyes shifted away and I spied a rouge tinge on his cheeks. It caused me to become self-conscious and divert my eyes away as well. And he did not say anything for some time. A sigh heaved his shoulders once, then he laid back down onto the ground and looked back up toward the heavens.

He is correct. I am the fool here. I lost my temper like I always do. An apology is required... But I could not muster the words. I sat there in silence, clenching my paws tight, my ears drooping and my tail, ashamedly, retreating betwixt my legs. My vision refused to train itself back upon him, I was prepared to get up, turn around and walk away, but that chance would not come.

“I came up here to get a better look at the stars,” he suddenly spoke. “It's a lot quieter up here too. I took my chance the second Rose rolled over in her sleep and let me out of her vice grips.”

I felt a warmth spread throughout me. A wash of hope soothed my shattered nerves and toils plaguing my mind. I stood my ground, as I was doing before. I sympathized with his plight, but I admit that I was also mildly agitated to hear its cause.

And now I understood that peculiar sleeping arrangement I spied before.

I pressed on, “W-while that may be so, you are at great risk up here.”

Not a word out of him. My chastising lecture failed to provoke anything, not even so much as a gesture of remorse.

“I know... But I haven't had a good night's sleep for a bit now. I thought that maybe a little quiet time would help. Been about two hours now, so I guess not.”

His weak laugh did not inspire confidence in me.

“It's been pretty bad skies for a while, it’s such a clear and beautiful night that I couldn't pass it up. I looked up there... and it felt as though- well, how do I put it? Déjà vu? Maybe. I was on the verge of remembering something... But nothing came. I can feel it building a

dam, but it's just making my head hurt."

I slid nearer and gazed upon the sky just as he did. There I saw the heavens displayed in their full glory above me. The children above watched back as they sparkled just like the gods' own jewels. Irisia watched the world with her waning eye... And now I recalled the children we had rescued.

"Gazing upon the heavens has allowed great thinkers from the furthest flung corners of antiquity unto this day make themselves feel smaller," I said softly, "Tis a humbling experience which assists in tempering hubris and altering perspectives." I looked back to Laven and mustered a gentle expression and said, "But there is no need to flagellate yourself by doing so."

"Come again?" Laven asked, visibly confused.

"You need not torture yourself. I know the weight of those girls' lives still bear down on your conscious. It is written upon your face." I crossed my paws over my heart and pleases, "If it offers you any solace... I earnestly believe you made a noble choice."

A look of resignation crept over Laven's face. This was not something he wished to discuss. It was something he wished to bury, but I would not allow him to. This was something that must be put in the past, so that it does not continue to haunt the future.

At last he opened his heart and asked, "But was it the right choice?"

"No such thing exists," I assured him.

"No such thing as a right or wrong choice?"

Laven slowly turned his head to finally look upon me once more.

"That's an odd thing to hear from you. Are you sure you're feeling alright?" he asked with furrowed brow and a voice heavy with skepticism.

"As judge, I have only the law. The law which governs the relations of state, men... and now monster... But final judgment is aptly named. It is not until the end when sin and virtue will be weighed against one another. In this instance, the only people who have the right to judge you will be those whose lives you saved. I suspect time will vindicate you, but only the gods know of this for sure. However, I believe in you. And I can say with a sound heart that you are no less radiant tonight than you were the day I met you."

Twas a... very embarrassing thing to say, but I spoke from the heart to help heal another. And verily, I saw radiance from Laven as-He smiled... warmly back at me.

"W-what?" I stuttered bashfully.

I don't... I do not recall the last time I saw that look upon his face while he gazed at me.

“Nothing,” he said with a chortle, “It's just been a while since I saw you smile like that.”

I reached up with my paws and touched my own face. Assuredly, my lips were drawn back and my cheeks were raised. It vanished the instant I realized it. Lightheaded seized me and the heat I felt surged up within me, I would not be at a loss should there have been steam pouring out from my ears. I thank the gods that his attention was already elsewhere and did not see my face deteriorate further while my nerves were in such a sorry state.

“Your right, of course. I can't beat myself up over what happened in that cave forever,” Laven said. “But that's not everything I was thinking about these last few days... I just realized that when I looked up at this moon and everything else, no matter how long I look, it's all jumbled up and alien to me.”

My heart shattered and the giddiness running rampant throughout me proved to be short lived. How could I have forgotten something so simple? The stars above represented something completely different in Laven's eyes. It wasn't a mural to the gods' glory. Every night he looked up the sky it reminded him how far away from home he truly was. There was a calm and somber sadness in his eyes as they tracked back and forth across the heavens.

“I mean, this moon orbits in the opposite direction. It rises in the west and sets in the east. Since it's so close to summer, those have got to be the cardinal directions if everything lines up. It was a full moon about a week ago, and now it darkens left to right too. Not to mention its huge! Something, like, what, a third bigger? There have got to be some real nasty tides and a wobble on this planet's axis. And right around here,” He said while pointing at various locations about the sky, “there should be Ursa Major and Minor. Virgo and Leo should be around here and there too.”

At last, he was comfortable to open up.

“Clamertz and Sidivis,” I responded as I pointed toward the previous two, “The Hunter and the Boar.”

“'That so?” He asked.

And lo, there in the sky where I pointed, where the stars neatly aligned in rows. Two constellations locked in their eternal battle in the heavens.

“So each one has its own story?” Laven asked. “I guess some things never change no matter where you go.”

And again he spoke of peculiar things. Laven does not do so often, but they are almost always fascinating. Perhaps I could goad him onward.

“The children of Irsisia are amateur historians in their own right. They frolic in the heavens and stage their games upon what they

see.”

“Children of Irsisia?” Laven asked with a yawn.

Of course, he couldn't possibly know.

“There is a myth which is common across many cultures, religions and even time: How the star children came to be. I know it from the tale of Nuthris and Irisia. They were goddesses who resided in the heavens up high long before the world was whole. They loved one another dearly, as sisters should.”

“Let me guess,” Laven interrupted, “Day and night.”

“That's right. They look near identical as well... Even in love. For you see, Horep, he who forged the land from mountaintop to valley floor, caught the attention of both. Yet it was Nuthris, with her beautiful blue eyes, who won the heart of the gentle giant. They would have a son, Rameth and it would be he who that travels across the sky and brings light and warmth over the land.”

Laven laughed quietly to himself, it caused me to pause. I do not recall this story being a comedy.

“Oh, sorry,” he apologized and then explained, “It's just that- Light without the sun? If they were watching Horep earlier without- Sorry, I've heard that somewhere before and it's still just as silly... Go on.”

I cleared my throat and hoped the gesture would invite no further interruptions, “But Irisia, whose only difference were eyes pitch black, became jealous. One day Rameth did not rise above the horizon and the world remained dark and a deathly cold chill seized it. And so Nuthris journeyed across the sky to find where her son had gone. But she was lost in the absolute darkness, at least until she happened upon a trial of sparking pearls littered across the sky. She followed them until she at last found Rameth in the arms of Irisia who tried to nurse the child from her own bosom. Rameth cried and kept spitting it up, leaving the pearl like stones behind. Without her dearest friend by her side, and with only the darkness, she had abandoned her senses. Instead of being furious, Nuthris embraced and forgave her. It was then that Rameth at last smiled and laughed, the brilliant light of which gave the pearls life of their own, each with a fraction of Ramth's own. And that is how the night sky became lit. Irisia adopted the children as her own and basked in their light, never to be alone again. And those children would play and mimic what they saw upon the world.”

“I'm not sure... if that's a happy ending or not,” Laven blithely said with another yawn.

“Whether it is sorrowful or not is of no concern to mere mortals. It is the mysterious way that the heavens go... Are you familiar with such a story, Laven?”

“Hmmmm,” his throat rumbled in thought, “Can't say I can

recall something quite like that."

Laven very often has interesting stories to tell; I was disappointed to see he was withholding them from me tonight. The way he explains things, details what he knows, the reasons he presents for them are more often than not also very compelling. I wished he would speak more of them tonight, but how could I- Of course!.. But first I'd need to- No. I can do it!

I fidgeted while gliding across the grass ever closer to Laven. Next to him I sat with my legs underneath me.

"Ahem- Laven- please place your head upon my lap."

His spellbound face as he stared at the heavens broke and he looked at me with bewilderment. I lightly patted the bare of my thigh again to make my intentions clear.

"T-this will only work should your eyes see it at the proper angle," I blustered.

Oh gods, what was I thinking?

When he did not move immediately, I repeated myself louder than before. My voice nearly cracking as I did.

"Laven... Place your head upon my lap!"

My face was now undoubtedly bright red. Twas merely a flight of fancy and I was acting impulsively on a flash of inspiration. But I had faith in my scheme and in Laven.

He eventually complied, but his movements were awkward and mechanical. It was not unlike a poorly constructed golem shambling into place, but he eventually laid down perpendicular to me and placed his dew soaked head upon my waiting lap. I felt a chill surge through me and I was not sure if its cause; it was either from the cold or my strained nerves.

"Now shut your eyes."

"Wait, what's this all about?" He said, his bewilderment turning to suspicion.

"Shut your eyes," I demanded.

Laven exasperated heavily, but complied.

It would be but a minor cantrip, but I believe its effect would be profound. These past days have been so chaotic, our priorities so scattered, that I had nearly forgotten something very important. From the æther, I retrieved my golden tome and materialized it for but a moment. Safely stowed away between its heavy golden pages were a series of simple browning paper which were utterly unbefitting of the tome itself.

The proper chant, articulate somatic gestures and a wish is everything required. Each page fluttered into the air on their own accord. They danced in the wind and circled around the two of us seated on the grass until each page began to glow. Each spot of

ordinary ink dotting the pages lit up. Numerous orbs of light peeled free from the pages and assembled together again. I watched them rise up into the night sky where they blanketed out the heavens themselves. I then scattered those hundred glowing spheres high into the sky above us. I vaguely knew their meaning, but if there was any meaning to gleam at all, it was not for my eyes to tell.

"Now, Laven... open them."

I looked down at Laven whose tired eyes peeled slowly, but suddenly shot open wide as he stared at the faint and flickering lights superimposed upon the heavens behind them.

"Wait," Laven said breathlessly, "That's the belt- Orion's Belt!"

I laid down beside Laven on the cold ground and stared up at the lights. He pointed at each group of lights, tracing them one by one and giving them names.

"But where would-" His body shook as the spark of realization struck him, "Back at the library-"

He turned his head to look at me. I looked down at him, and then nodded in affirmation.

"Far to the south, in the ruins of a civilization which existed long ago, these patterns were etched onto a temple's walls. Remember?"

"And it's too exact to be a coincidence... Dammit! How could I have forgotten all about it?" He breathed a sigh of relief as his body appeared ready to melt into the ground.

"Could it be-" I tentatively asked, "That for all these days: You've been stricken with home sickness?"

That had to be the root cause of all this.

"I suppose-" He yawned much longer than before as his voice began to slur, "-it was... Is..."

"Then be glad the rainy season will shield you from the mischief of Irisia's children," I joked.

A warm smile formed on his face as she slowly spoke, "Thank you, Shoshanah. I feel as if... I've seen this before somewhere... Maybe... In a dream-"

The truth of Laven's existence lies somewhere in this world. It is lost, but only forgotten: Hidden in a faraway land. Come hell or high water, we will banish those who bar our journey. For his sake, I will clear a path. We will overcome the evil and misguided souls and reach the lands across the southern seas. It is there that all should become clear. Laven will never be whole until this mystery is solved. No matter where he goes, no matter how long he waits, or where he rests, nowhere will never be home until he is at home in his own mind.

When I gazed back down at Laven's eyes were closed, his

breathing was rhythmic and he was at peace. It appeared as though the world weighing him down had vanished. The black marks below his eyes, which betrayed how tired to an unimaginable degree, seemed inconsequential. Not even I, in all my years of solitude, ever had to endure the pain of being separated from my home.

I dispelled the lights still floating in the sky and sat there for a moment to bask in the silence. Besides the gentle breeze, there was only Laven's quiet breaths. The ground was wet and frigid, but I dared not disgrace Laven by moving him. I had invited him, but he had chosen to slumber here on his accord. Twas not my place to move him. Instead, I adjusted the tent canvas draped over my shoulders to cover the two of us to the fullest extend possible.

Before I realized it myself, my paw came to rest on top of Laven's head. The jet black fur of my paw traced through his scraggly brown mane. The memory of his hand on top of my own head between my ears came back to me. Such a trivial thought filled me with such warmth; it was overwhelming. My cheeks felt as though a raging fire had been stoked within myself. When I spied droplets of water trickle from the corner of his eyes, I did not fret, because his smile had not abandoned him. I gently plucked the water from his cheeks with my claw and dried his cheeks with a brush of my paw. No longer was his body cold and frigid. There was warmth there and I could feel his heat transfer to me.

“We did not meet long ago,” I spoke gently to his sleeping face, “But I feel as though I have already known you for an eon.”

Why is it only now-

He did not rouse from his sleep due to my words, but that did not cause me to cease. My paw returned to his unkempt mop of hair and tenderly pet him.

-That I can be so honest?

“For many thousands of years my spirit was hidden away. I spent nearly two hundred of those awake, but alone... Yet... I would now not have it any other way. I no longer fear any hardship, no matter how insurmountable the odds may be... Because- I have already overcome the most difficult of them all. Our meeting was the most improbable event: The result of a ridiculous series of coincidence, accident and impossibility.”

I brushed his bangs aside once more and teased them between my paw.

“So sleep for now... And may sweet dreams grace you. Tomorrow will soon come, and Ramth’s shining glory with it.”

This time I cared not if someone saw or strayed near. I leaned over, slowly, and brought my face next to Laven's. My lips hovered above his forehead for a moment, but I felt a pull tease me elsewhere.

They moved to his own lips, parted slightly and defenseless. And I gently pressed them both together. The warmth I soaked in before was but nothing compared to this. My heart raced, but my mind calmed and became serene. A thunderstorm of worry that assaulted my mind was banished in an instant. Then I pulled back and looked upon his unsuspecting and smiling face. Once again, I could not stifle my own.

"Goodnight, Laven."

And once more I looked up into the sky. Dancing there, amongst the heavens, a single child streaked gleefully across the sky. His brothers and sisters cheered and applauded, twinkling as they always have, and always will. The night is dark, but those children are always endeavored to be there for one another.

And so too, shall I.